The RED CROSS GIRLS *with the* ITALIAN ARMY

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

W

To Dorothy
from Eloise
Dec 24th 1918.

THE RED CROSS GIRLS WITH THE ITALIAN ARMY

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Lifting Sonya's Hand He Bent His Head and Kissed It

The Red Cross Girls With the Italian Army

By
MARGARET VANDERCOOK
Author of "The Ranch Girls Series," "Stories about Camp Fire Girls Series," etc.

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THE RED CROSS GIRLS WITH THE ITALIAN ARMY

CHAPTER I

The New Day

"HOW strange to be returning to Europe, and so soon, Nona, when I had thought never to cross the ocean again!"

One afternoon in late February, a woman and a girl were walking slowly up and down the deck of a ship. Yet if either of them felt the anxiety, which was natural under the conditions of traveling by sea then, neither betrayed the fact. Perchance the day was so wonderful they had caught a measure of its inspiration. For sailing from New York City a little more than two weeks before under a cloud of rain and mist they had now reached the eternal blue of the Mediterranean water and sky.

"Ah, but, Sonya, these are days when one never knows from one hour to the next what may be taking place in the world, nor how the changes may affect one's own life. Still, a year does not seem such a short time to me!"

The older of the two companions laughed

"That is because you are so young, Nona. As for me, I am ashamed to confess how quickly a year flies. But never has there been so glorious a year as this, with Russia—my own country—free at last."

Sonya Valesky stopped for a moment and, although making no outward movement with her hands, in her heart she registered the "Sign of the Cross."

Some time before she had been exiled from Russia for preaching peace when Russia was in the throes of the most terrible phase of the great war.

Then, with three of the four American Red Cross Girls, who had been nursing the Russian wounded, she had left her own land for England and France, and later the United States. But all her life Sonya's work

and prayers had been devoted toward the creation of a free Russia; and now, within the past few weeks, she, too, had been a witness of the great mystery of good which has been so strangely born out of the evil of this present war. For Russia, in the most wonderful revolution in history, had lately declared herself a republic, so that Sonya's dream at last was realized.

"I wish we were returning to Russia, Nona, instead of Italy," she added, with a wistful inflection in her modulated voice. For, in spite of speaking English perfectly, Sonya had a slight foreign accent. "I would not preach peace in Russia these days—not until other people are free as we are. I too have learned a lesson. But why, Nona, are we going to Italy? I scarcely know. It seems to me that I have fallen under your influence a great deal recently when, as I am old enough to be your elder sister, the influence ought to be the other way around."

Before replying, Nona Davis slipped her arm through her friend's and drew her over to the ship's railing, where they stood looking out over the tranquil face of the waters.

"We are going to Italy, Sonya, because Italy is the country where I now most wish to help with Red Cross nursing. In spite of your insisting that you cannot nurse, you will probably be just as useful in some other way. You remember we first met you on shipboard when Eugenia, Barbara, Mildred Thornton and I were crossing the Atlantic to begin our first nursing with the British Army; then later in France and Belgium and in Russia. Well, as Eugenia married her little French captain and is now Madame Castaigne, at present she has charge of one of the largest field hospitals in France, and Mildred Thornton is with her. Poor Mildred has never yet been able to marry General Alexis, and her family is not willing she should, with Russia so far away, until this war is over. But, as Mildred was so restless at home, she crossed over again to join Eugenia and go on with the nursing in France at about the time you and I went south to our old place in Charleston. Since Barbara and Dick Thornton have a very new son, of course Barbara is occupied

with another kind of nursing now I am the only one of the original four Red Cross girls left to 'do a bit' for Italy. Certainly you would not allow me to cross all alone, nor would I leave you to go on dreaming in dear old 'before the war' Charleston. These days, Sonya, it is 'New Dreams for Old,' to quote that lovely poem:

"'Is there no voice in the world to come crying,
New dreams for old!
New for old?
Many have long in my heart been lying
Faded, weary and cold.'"

Nona paused. She was a fair, slender girl with a wealth of pale blonde hair which the soft southern winds were now blowing about her face. She was wearing a loose coat of an odd shade of green with a broad collar of tan silk, and a small green hat, which by contrast showed brighter the gold of her hair.

Her friend and companion looked older, since her hair was almost white. The one-time Russian noblewoman had extraordinary deep, dark-blue eyes with dark

brows and lashes, skin of a strange Russian pallor, and a beautiful mobile mouth, more able to express emotion than most persons.

At this instant she smiled rather teasingly upon the younger girl.

"Oh, Nona, of course I understand that I must wake up again and find some new work. I suppose I have grown idle; and yet life has been so difficult for me for so many years that I feel glad to have been able to rest. Nevertheless I think I have been pretty well occupied in looking after you in Charleston and trying to prevent your marrying any one of those nice southern boyhood friends of yours. What an extraordinary number of boys you must have known when you were a little girl, Nona. You could not have played with boys exclusively, and besides you always told me you led a remarkably lonely life as a child. Yet each young fellow I met insisted I was to trust you with him, since you had played together as children. That is one of the real reasons why I came away with you; I want to keep you to myself a little while longer, and you know you have

promised me not to consider an Italian. I do not wish the American Red Cross girls to make so many international marriages; Eugenia and Mildred are quite enough."

Nona laughed, nevertheless she flushed slightly.

"I don't think you should talk in so frivolous a fashion, Sonya, when we are going to Italy on such a serious mission. Besides, it was nonsense to pay any attention to my few old friendships in Charleston. You need not worry over me. You see, I am not so attractive as the other Red Cross girls. It is simply that you don't understand American society and the freedom to which American girls are accustomed."

Nona turned so as to face her companion.

"I do wish, Sonya, you would not be so difficult about the young Italian fellow on board ship with us—Carlo Navara—hasn't he a charming name? He is a very boyish fellow, yet as soon as I begin to talk to him you manage to send word that you wish to see me. I am not used to such

a very severe chaperon, Sonya. You see, Eugenia had to divide her attention between three of us. Besides, don't you think Signor Navara's story delightfully romantic. I told you he had confided to me that he came to the United States when he was only a tiny boy and used to sing in the streets. Then, one day some one overheard him and began giving him lessons. He hopes to become a great artist some day, if he is not killed in Italy. Yet he felt it his duty to give up his career and return to fight for his country. I don't understand your prejudice, Sonya; his seems to me a charming story."

Sonya shrugged her shoulders, which was a frequent gesture with her, and characteristic of her foreign birth.

"Charming, but not original, Nona! Yet, let us not quarrel about your first Italian hero. The young fellow is simply not a gentleman, which means I feel one could not trust him in a critical situation. Otherwise he is agreeable and very good looking. But one can never anticipate the future of a traveling acquaintance; one may not see

him again, or he may turn up constantly. Personally I rather hope, when Signor Navara reaches the front, we may be through with him."

The young girl looked as if she disagreed, but before replying glanced up and down the long deck.

Until then she and Sonya had believed they were alone. But within the last few moments several other passengers had appeared. Among them was the young man whom they had been discussing. He wore a student's hat and a military cape.

"You are not very democratic, Sonya, in spite of all your views of freedom and democracy," Nona expostulated. "But I have known a good many other persons who talked one way and behaved another."

"Just say I am not consistent," Sonya laughed, "I prefer that charge."

But they ceased talking. Nona's new acquaintance had leaned over the side of the ship at no great distance from where she and Sonya were standing.

Unconsciously their gaze must have followed the direction of his.

The water was placid and blue, with tiny flourishes of foam curling along the edges of the waves. The air blew so sweet that their ship must be nearing one of the Italian islands and have caught the fragrance of blossoming fruits.

Then, at a distance of some hundreds of yards, and in the midst of the blue tranquillity, a strange oily substance—not very large, and yet shimmering in the sunlight—shone on the top of the water. At the same time a little column of foam shot straight up in the air.

The young man turned.

In her life Nona believed she had never seen a face so frightened—never in any of the tragic experiences of her past years of Red Cross nursing. But the young singer did not look at her. He turned to Sonya, and something in her answering glance may have helped him.

At the same instant one of the lookout men on the ship's bridge must have sighted the same spectacle, for immediately there was a deep roar from one of the ship's guns and then a second explosion. However,

the little oily substance and the small upright column of water had disappeared, so that the guns seemed to be firing only into the blue, far-off space. Before this moment the ship had been going rapidly through the quiet sea, but now her speed increased until she could move no faster, and seemed in danger from her own engines.

Perhaps five minutes passed; probably only two or three; then from beneath the placid surface of the water a long ripple showed. Almost instantly there was a grinding, tearing noise; the great ship lurched forward, and her engines ceased to move.

It all happened so quickly, while Nona and Sonya were arguing over a trifle, and while the greater number of the ship's passengers were having an afternoon sleep.

"We have been struck by a torpedo, haven't we?" Nona asked as quietly as if this were an ordinary question.

Sonya nodded.

"Stay here, Nona; I'll return in an instant."

Then Nona also heard her murmur to

the young Italian, of whom she had been so scornful a short time before.

"Hold on to your courage; there is no great danger."

Sonya disappeared among the passengers and crew who quickly crowded the deck. Almost by magic the officers and men stood in their appointed places while orders were given for the lowering of the life boats.

Sonya was right in saying there was no great danger because the day was calm and the sea quiet.

Moreover, there were not many passengers, for people were not traveling except for urgent reasons. Besides Nona Davis there were three other Red Cross nurses; perhaps a dozen young Italians going home to join the colors; Nona's acquaintance; several doctors and a number of business men.

There was one Italian woman with a little girl of three or four crossing to join her husband, who had gone to Italy before the beginning of the submarine danger.

It really seemed to Nona Davis that she was almost too interested in what was tak-

ing place to feel especially frightened; besides, it was all so brief.

One of her American friends aboard came up to her.

"Don't be frightened; I'll look after you and Madame Valesky when the right moment comes. Remember Admiral Farragut's 'damn the torpedo.'"

And Nona positively had courage to smile!

Dr. Latham was another one of her acquaintances concerning whom Sonya was not enthusiastic. But there was no possible criticism of Dr. Robert Latham except that she did not like his brusque manners. For Dr. Latham was a distinguished surgeon accustomed to giving orders and to being obeyed, and on leaving New York Nona had been placed under his especial care. But in spite of her democratic principles, although entirely unaware of the fact herself, Sonya had also been accustomed to rule. There had been no difficulty between her and Dr. Latham beyond the fact that they did not seem to like each other, and Sonya had avoided him whenever it was possible.

She came back now with the three other Red Cross nurses who were crossing to nurse under the Italian flag.

"Dr. Latham, will you look after the young soldier?" she asked. "We can take care of ourselves, and he seems almost in a state of collapse."

Again Nona looked toward the young man whom she had been defending, but whom she had since forgotten, while Sonya remembered.

He was leaning over the ship's rail—just as he had when he first came on deck—with his face deathly pale and his large dark eyes fixed on the same faraway place on the water.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," Dr. Latham answered abruptly. "The young man can look after himself. This is a case of artistic temperament, fine material for a soldier. I'll see every woman aboard in the first lifeboat."

"I shall go last," Sonya answered.

But that instant an order was given by some officer and, before she had time to protest, Sonya found herself following the

other women into the first lifeboat, and being assisted down the ladder by Dr. Latham.

The next instant the young Italian was also with them, he being the first man, by Dr. Latham's aid, to leave the ship.

When the command came to pull away it may have been curious, but neither Nona nor Sonya were alarmed. The sea was so calm and blue; it was still early afternoon and the coast of Italy could not lie very far away.

CHAPTER II

The Night

"I will die cheering, if I needs must die;
So shall my last breath write upon my lips
Viva Italia! when my spirit slips
Down the great darkness from the mountain sky;
And those who shall behold me where I lie
Shall murmur—'Look you! how his spirit dips
From glory into glory! The eclipse
Of death is vanquished! Lo, his victory cry.'"

IT seemed strange to hear this new song of victory ring out over the waters of the Mediterranean Sea at the darkest hour of the night, and yet every human being aboard the lifeboat listened and was helped by it.

It was Sonya who had persuaded the young Italian to sing, and his voice was very clear and very beautiful.

Nona found herself listening with eyes half closed, as she was worn out with anxiety and fatigue. For, at last, all the

other voices of fear, bitterness and repining were stilled.

If, without any particular sensation of fear, Nona had found herself aboard a small boat being rowed by sailors after the torpedoing of their vessel the afternoon before, she had just been passing through what she believed was the longest and hardest night of her life. And yet she remembered the night when she had gone with the Russian army in their retreat across ruined villages and frozen fields.

For the Mediterranean, which had been so blue and friendly at the hour of their accident, about sundown had changed, as it frequently does.

Suddenly the sky and sea had both darkened until they were no longer blue but black; the sun had quickly vanished and afterwards a cold mist arose.

But until this occurred the passengers in the lifeboat with Nona and Sonya had made every effort to remain cheerful.

Nona had suggested that, in ancient days men and women often crossed the seas in galleys rowed by strong oarsmen, so why

not pretend they were captives being brought to Rome under a guard of sailors? Actually she and Mollie Drew—one of the other Red Cross nurses—and one with a real Irish ancestry—argued the question as to which of them was the "Captive Princess."

It was not that the two girls intended being frivolous, or that they failed to appreciate the gravity of the situation, but that they wished to show good courage. For a little later, when they had moved a safe distance from their ship, but were still near enough to watch her go down, Mollie collapsed and with true Irish suddenness hid her face in the folds of Sonya's coat.

However, the torpedoed ship did not sink as soon as her officers had expected. When she did, each man and woman who saw her would like to have followed Mollie's example, although most of them simply remained silent.

There is no more beautiful or perhaps tragic sight than the sinking of a great ship. Even at a considerable distance she could

be seen to plunge, struggle and then right herself as if she were human. Then, just before the water closed above her, it seemed as if she uttered a forsaken cry.

"Another misfortune of war," Dr. Latham exclaimed to Nona, but in an unsteady voice.

Nona made no effort to reply.

At the last moment Dr. Latham had come aboard their lifeboat. There was one more seat to be filled and it was well to have a few men aboard beside the sailors.

Nevertheless it was not Dr. Latham who took command, but in an unconscious fashion it was Sonya.

In the past year, living with her Russian friend, Nona Davis had made the discovery that Sonya was now and then apt to be difficult when things were going smoothly, but showed her real courage and sweetness in misfortune.

You see, she had led so strange a life. When she was a little Russian girl, with a family of wealth and distinction, she had been fêted and adored. The little Sonya was a great beauty and would one day

inherit great wealth. Then she had gone away to school, where secretly she had come in contact with principles of life wholly new to her—the belief that there should be no Czar; that Russia should be free, and that all men were brothers. Then Sonya had read Tolstoy's writings and had begun to study his principles of universal peace. She had traveled in many lands, still preaching her doctrine, and had returned to Russia during the war, only to be exiled to Siberia. But when her reprieve came through an unexpected influence, and Sonya returned to the United States with the three Red Cross girls, she seemed suddenly to have grown tired of all the sorrows and arduous work of her past life. After she and Nona had settled down in the exquisite, peaceful old southern city of Charleston, Sonya appeared to care only to rest and to read. She had money enough to make herself and Nona both comfortable in a quiet fashion.

As a matter of fact, she had not wished to return to any part of the European war zone. Sonya was weary of tragedy and

felt she had earned the right to a more placid existence. It was only Nona Davis' determination to continue her Red Cross nursing in Italy which had finally influenced her friend. But, even then, Sonya had insisted she would do nothing but take a small villa in Italy, where she would be near enough to Nona to be of service to her, if necessary.

Nevertheless, on board the lifeboat it was Sonya who was doing more than any one else to encourage her fellow travelers.

From the first Nona's friend—the young Italian, Carlo Navara, whom Sonya had disliked—had depended upon her in an almost absurd fashion.

Dr. Latham had been right. If the young artist was going home to be a soldier, he made a poor showing in his first contact with danger.

The women—except Sonya—as well as the men, made no effort to hide their scorn of him, because the moment he took his place along with the others he covered his face with his hands, shaking as though he were physically ill. And when the boat

lurched he would take his hands down to cry out in terror.

He had such an unfortunate effect on the others who were trying to be brave that he might have been roughly treated if Sonya had not been present.

Several times Dr. Latham shouted at him, kindly at first.

"See here, young fellow, don't you know we are pretty fortunate? What's the trouble with you? Aren't we all in life-boats without the loss of a life? And isn't the sea calm? This isn't the Atlantic Ocean, where there might be oreason for alarm."

But this was not the kind of conversation that ever comforts anyone, although there are people who believe one is happier in remembering that some one else is more wretched. Yet it seems a poor consolation always.

At any rate, Carlo paid no attention to the doctor's brusque efforts, and had it not been for Sonya would probably have gone to pieces altogether.

Several times Nona felt sorry that she

had ever made friends or championed the young Italian. But she was really almost asleep, with her head resting against the big doctor's great shaggy coat, when Carlo began to sing.

It must have been about two or three o'clock in the morning. For six or eight hours the small boat had been tossed by the choppy waves which had followed the sinking of the sun. There was food and water aboard, nevertheless by this time Nona and most of the other women felt too ill to think of touching food. Sonya and Dr. Latham, working together, had forced all of them to have a little food at midnight as well as at the dinner hour the night before.

It was Sonya, also, who asked Mollie Drew to take care of the one child aboard, so the mother could sleep. Thus Mollie was kept from thinking too much about herself.

Then, when everybody's courage was going—and when the sailors were too weary to do more than keep the lifeboat afloat—Sonya had commanded the young Italian musician to see if a song would be of service.

He had insisted that it would be useless, but Sonya had been determined and, as he had yielded to her influence before, he must do so again.

Then, as he sang, his self-respect came back to him.

It was a wonderful experience Nona felt —even in the midst of her discomfort and suffering. For she was stiff and aching from so many long hours in a cramped position. She was also cold and wet through her heavy coat and was beginning to believe they would never be rescued.

"Live, thou, upon my lips, Italia mine,
The sacred death-cry of my frozen clay!
Let thy dear light upon my body shine
And to the passerby this message say:
Ecco! though heaven has made my skies divine,
My deep love sanctifies my soul for aye."

More beautiful than before was the voice which rang out over the waters, with a triumphant note closing this last verse.

When the song ceased Nona must have fallen into a real sleep.

For, when she awoke it was almost dawn,

and it seemed to her the sea was growing quieter. Except for the sailors, who were on watch, everybody in the lifeboat appeared to be either wholly asleep or in a stupor.

Nona could hear the big doctor, who sat beside her, making strange noises.

Only Sonya, sitting alone and at some distance off, Nona found to be still awake.

She must have been very tired, and yet it seemed to Nona that she had never seen her friend more beautiful.

Sonya wore a long, severely plain blue coat, and the heavy veil which had been bound about her head had become unloosened and was now floating backward in the morning mist. Out of the pallor of her face, her blue eyes showed with extraordinary depth of beauty and color, while her mouth wore an expression of infinite wistfulness and sympathy.

Yet it was Sonya and one of the sailors who almost at the same instant sighted a little Italian fishing boat.

It had come forth early from Naples, risking the dangers in order to be first at

the fishing. For food was dear in Italy, as elsewhere, and fish one of the things upon which the poor depended.

The first pink hue had begun to show very faintly in the pearl of the sky, yet the sails of the small fishing boats were of a deep rose color.

Certainly they looked rose color, indeed, when the little smack, hearing the signal of distress before she caught sight of the life-boat, came into view of the shipwrecked men and women with all her little sails bravely flying.

Some hours later Nona Davis had her first vision of Italy, and felt almost as if it repaid her for what she had just passed through.

The water of the bay of Naples was blue once more; the city a glory of color shining by this time in the midday sun, and beyond lay Mount Vesuvius forming a kind of amethyst, brooding cloud above the city.

Nona was standing by the tall doctor, who seemed in a measure to have adopted her in the last twelve hours, when their sail boat rode into the bay with its unex-

pectedly large number of passengers. But, somehow, the news had preceded the boat, as the shore was lined with friendly, sympathetic Italian faces, with a waving of Italian and one or two American flags.

Sonya had been with some other people, but came up at this instant to join Nona and the doctor.

"Remember what Goethe says, Nona dear, whatever befalls us, 'He who can remember Naples can never more be quite unhappy.'"

CHAPTER III

Italia

THE next afternoon at four o'clock Sonya and Nona and the three new Red Cross nurses were having tea on the broad terrace of the Bertolini, which overhangs Naples. Below them lay the city and the bay, and in front, wrapped in her usual amethyst cloud, stood Vesuvius.

Although it was only late February, spring was soon coming to southern Italy. Already the quiver of her arrows had been felt in the gardens and woods, as the shrubs and the branches of the trees were green; the almond and cherry buds were beginning to open; and their fragrance filled the air with a wonderful perfume.

The manner in which the girls were drinking tea and eating strange Italian sweets would have suggested to no one the peril through which they had just passed.

But then there was no sign of gloom or

of war among the Italian visitors at the garden. There were a few soldiers wearing uniforms, but this would have been true in times of peace in Italy.

"I declare it is worth everything we have suffered to spend just this one afternoon in such an enchanted place!" Mollie Drew exclaimed with true Irish abandon to the emotion of the moment. "I never dreamed Italy was so lovely. In coming over here to nurse, one feels as if Italy would do more for us than we can ever do for her."

"Open my heart and you will see graved inside of it, 'Italy'," Nona responded, holding her tea cup in her hand and gazing at the wonderful panorama about them.

Not far off, down the slope of the terrace, stood a beautiful Cedar of Lebanon, its green branches spreading forth like a canopy with the deeper green tone beneath, while half-way up its trunk a cluster of young cherry trees were covered with white mists of blossoms.

Sonya Valesky had not been paying much attention to the conversation of the four girls, but she now glanced toward Nona Davis and smiled.

"Nona, do I have to hear you quote poetry from the time we start for Italy until we return home? Because it seems to me you break into rhyme with almost every other sentence. I trust you will try Italian poetry upon the Italian soldiers when you are nursing. I wonder if you girls know more of the language than Nona and I do? We have been studying for the past few months, and long ago I thought I knew a little Italian."

In finding herself apparently acting as chaperon for *four* Red Cross girls instead of *one*, Sonya was surprised, and had not yet had an opportunity to make up her mind whether she were altogether pleased. At present, however, she appeared to have no choice in the matter.

When she and Nona had finally concluded to come to Italy, Nona had written to several friends engaged in Red Cross work in New York City and through them had made their plans for the trip to Italy. At the time Nona was told that three or four other Red Cross nurses would probably be going over on the same steamer, and a

prominent New York physican as well, but there had been no meeting between any of them until they had found one another on the ship.

But, even then, as Sonya had preferred to spend a good part of each day in her stateroom, she had left most of the friendliness to Nona, and had only talked to the other Red Cross girls a few times, and without any suggestion of a future intimacy.

But the night they had passed together in danger appeared to have altered their relation.

The morning after their safe arrival in Naples, Mollie Drew had come into Nona's and Sonya's room, first to thank Sonya for her kindness the night before and also to apologize for what she chose to call her own lack of self-control Afterwards she said frankly:

"I don't know whether either of you is interested to know anything about me, but if you don't mind I'd like to have you know. I have just taken the nurse's training for the past two years in order to help with the war nursing. My father used to

be an Irish politician in New York City and we had considerable money. But as he has lost most of it and married again, and there are a good many children in our family, I thought I should learn to take care of myself."

Mollie must have been about eighteen or twenty. She was not very aristocratic in appearance, but she was all the prettier for this. Indeed, she was what one is apt to consider a typical Irish girl. Her eyes were very big and gray, with thick dark lashes and brows, and with soft shadows under them. She had a wealth of bright, reddish hair and the delicate skin with the few freckles which usually accompany it.

So far in their acquaintance Mollie had appeared entirely demure and sweet-tempered, but Sonya wondered if these characteristics would continue under different circumstances. For the present Mollie had taken a great fancy to her and wished to make a good impression.

On board the steamer, Dolores King—the second of the new Red Cross girls—had exchanged confidences with Nona Davis.

Dolores was from New Orleans and belonged to an old Creole family. So, as she and Nona were both southerners, a bond had straightway been established between them. Even on board the steamer they had spent a good deal of time together and planned to work together if possible, since Nona dreaded the loneliness without the former Red Cross girls.

As a matter of fact, the two girls formed a really charming picture together. Nona Davis was as tall and delicately fair as the proverbial fairy princess, while Dolores King's Spanish name suggested her appearance. She was a dainty little thing, very vivacious and daring, yet dark and vivid as a tropical flower.

The third new girl—Agatha Burton—had light brown hair and eyes, a quiet manner, and although friendly with the others, so far had not considered it necessary to say much concerning herself. She also was a New York girl who had been trained in a New York City hospital.

But it was Sonya who had allowed her fellow travelers to know nothing of her

past history. In agreeing to come abroad with Nona Davis, whom she had adopted and regarded almost as a younger sister, Sonya had made Nona promise to keep her story a secret. For Sonya was weary of the curiosity and the interest and questioning which any knowledge of her life always excited among strangers. Her foreign name was enough to make people curious, and Sonya still continued to be called Madame Valesky, although she had never married. She had decided that she preferred to be regarded merely as a society woman who had spent a conventional life. As she had sufficient money for herself and Nona to live upon quietly, and as her own beauty and rather unusual social distinction gave this impression, Sonya had no difficulty in establishing the reputation.

"I know Italian fairly well and will be glad to be of assistance at any time," Agatha Burton now replied. "I suppose we will travel a part of the distance to the north of Italy together."

But no one paid much attention to her answer, because just then Nona began to

wave her hand and cause a mild disturbance among the groups of people at the tea tables, who were always prepared to be amused by American girls.

"There is Dr. Latham wandering about and looking like a shabby old bear among all these handsome Italians. Suppose I ask him to join us?"

But, without waiting for an invitation, the big doctor came lumbering up.

He must have been about forty, but appeared much older, as his hair was gray and his eyebrows shaggy over his fine keen eyes. Since the war began he had made several discoveries of great importance to the care of the wounded and his journey to Italy was being made for the purpose of explaining his discoveries to the Italian medical profession.

Now, without revealing the fact, he quietly observed the entire group of women and knew how they were feeling with one apparently casual glance.

The four girls he saw had entirely recovered from the night of stress through which they had all so recently passed. But

the good-looking woman, whose name was too difficult to remember and who was not disposed to be pleased with him, appeared much the worse for wear.

"Well, that is natural enough, as she is older than the others," Dr. Latham concluded, while Nona and Dolores—the two girls for whom he had showed a decided liking during their crossing—made a place for him between them.

However, Dr. Latham had confessed to himself that Sonya's courage and self-possession the night of their disaster had amazed him, as his particular *bête noir* was the type of idle, society women whom *he* believed she represented.

To be idle, or to care for society at any time, Dr. Latham considered an evidence of mental weakness. But to be either of those things, with almost the entire world at war, showed a moral weakness as well.

Yet, for some reason, which she could scarcely have explained to herself, Sonya rather enjoyed encouraging the "good doctor's" poor opinion of her. She had asked Nona particularly not to undeceive him.

If Dr. Latham had known she had spoken of him as the "good doctor" he would have liked her even less.

"May I give you some tea? Did you ever see any place in your entire life so beautiful and so romantic as Naples? Of course I have to quote poetry in Italy, when Italy is the home of romance and beauty!" Nona ejaculated, not waiting for a reply to any of her rapid-fire questions.

However, Dr. Latham shook his head over the suggestion of tea.

"Don't believe in stimulants, though I suppose tea is the best of the lot! See here, Miss Nona, it is all very well for girls to talk about the *romance* of Italy, but I wonder how much you American girls know of her *history?* Are you familiar with the story of the new Italy, Madame?

So unexpectedly did Dr. Latham now turn upon Sonya that she started, as she was scarcely listening to him.

Why, no, I'm afraid not. But perhaps information is not so important to me, as I've no knowledge and no idea of doing Red Cross work."

Sonya's tone was intentionally careless. She did not desire the American doctor to consider that he had any interest in her or authority over her. He might feel he possessed both with regard to the American Red Cross nurses.

But that instant Nona frowned with evident annoyance upon Sonya. They were devoted to each other, but this did not prevent them from having occasional quarrels. Few people who live together escape entirely, but more particularly they do not when they happen to be two girls or women.

Nona really liked and admired the celebrated New York physician immensely and did not intend that Sonya should be rude to him.

"But the rest of us are going to nurse and would like you to tell us something of recent Italian history very much indeed," she insisted warmly, becoming more annoyed by Sonya's slow teasing smile.

"You see, I have been wondering why one always speaks of Italy as a democracy when Italy has a king."

The big doctor grunted.

"Yes, that is true; but you'll soon be finding out there are no more truly democratic people in the world in spirit than these same Italians. And their king, I hear, has only been away from the front for two days since Italy's war began. A great, little man, this Vittorio Emanuele III! Do you realize Italy is the only country in history that has ever had a rebirth of greatness and that there have been only three kings since the new Italy began?"

Dr. Latham smiled good-naturedly at Sonya.

"I hope I am not boring everybody too much, but this story of modern Italy is rather a passion with me. My grandfather fought with Garabaldi to free Italy from Austria in 1848 and to create a united country. Now I am also trying to fight in the way I hope to be of most value for the Italia Irredenta."

The American doctor paused as if he were a little embarrassed by his own enthusiasm.

But before any one else could reply, Mollie Drew leaned over the tea table and said:

"I am a very ignorant Irish person, big Doctor, so please do not tell on me. I have never had the courage to make this confession until now. But, honestly, I don't know what 'Italia Irredenta' means, although I have been hearing the expression ever since Italy entered the present war."

Dr. Latham laughed, pleased with Mollie's honesty.

"Probably a good many other persons are in the same state, Miss Drew, but will not confess. Nevertheless, as we are going to nurse the wounded from the neighborhood of this same Italia Irredenta, we ought to understand. You see, when Italy was freed by her three great patriots—Cavour her political, Mazzini her spiritual, and Garabaldi her fighting patriot—and when all the little kingdoms in which Italy was then divided were transformed into the present Italy, the Italians wished the high border of the Alps for the natural border of their country. This was true before the time of Christ. Yet, in the last revolution, they succeeded in securing only a small portion of their beautiful white chain

of hills. Austria still controls the highest summits of the Alps and some of Italy's oldest cities. These are the provinces on the Austrian frontier—the Italia Irredenta —which Italy is striving to win back. Italy also is fighting for peace and the future of civilization. There was never before so single a cause in all the world's history!"

Then the big doctor made an awkward, shamefaced bow.

"But I'm not a German professor in disguise. In future I promise to swallow all the information I may be able to find concerning Italy, or anything else, if you will say you forgive me for making my one historical lecture. In future I'll stick to my own subjects."

Nona Davis nodded and then sighed.

"As long as the lecture is over there is nothing else we can do, though a 'little learning is a dangerous thing,' please remember." Then she lowered her voice a little.

"But don't talk about being a 'German' please, Doctor—even in fun—when we are in an enemy country. I suppose, because

I have been doing Red Cross nursing so long and have had so many queer experiences, I have grown to believe no one can be too careful. One never can guess, and the most unlikely person is often suspected. Besides, I know you will think I am only self-conscious, or worse, but I have had a sensation as if we were being watched pretty carefully ever since we arrived in Naples."

The big doctor shook himself and laughed.

"American girls are fairly apt to be noticed in Italy—or watched, if you like the word better—at all times. I don't think you will be the exception. But if you are thinking of returning to your hotel I should like to see you safely there. Moreover, I should like to speak to you alone, Madame."

He turned to Sonya and arose.

Mystified, she got up, the four girls following her example.

It was impossible to imagine what the American doctor could have to tell her which he did not wish her companions to hear. She had certainly made every effort to

discourage any possible intimacy or even further acquaintance between them. But plainly he was not easily to be discouraged or set aside from any purpose he might have in mind. Sonya was accustomed to having men admire her; yet she realized the American doctor not only did not admire, but even distrusted and disliked her. Therefore his confidence could have nothing to do with himself. However, she had to acknowledge to herself that he had a force that was difficult to disregard.

Walking on ahead with Dr. Latham, she did not observe, although Nona Davis did, that two young men, who had been at one of the tea tables not far away, kept their party in sight, by following them at a respectful distance.

But this was because Dr. Latham began on his subject without wasting any time in preliminaries.

"It is about that young musician who crossed with us that I wish to speak. I might as well tell you, Madame Valesky, I may understand sick bodies, but not sick minds. And that is what I presume is at

present the trouble with this young Italian. In any case, I had a note from him this morning bidding me come to him as soon as possible. I thought the boy might be ill with a sore throat or some other ailment from that nonsense of singing in the damp air of the night. But his voice seems unaffected, for he told me a long story. He seems to feel he eternally disgraced himself by his cowardice and so never dares trust himself to become a soldier. I was to say a great deal to the various signoritas, to beg their forgiveness and their prayers in a hundred different ways and ask them to remember him kindly. Oh, stuff and nonsense, the end of the boy's confidence was that he was planning to do away with himself in a fit of remorse and dread of the future. I told you his was a bad case of artistic temperament."

Sonya felt her head swimming a little. She had not liked Nona's intimacy with the young Italian on board ship; nevertheless, he was a strangely gifted boy and somehow his weakness and dependence on her in the night of their common danger

had changed her feeling to one of interest. She seemed to hear the boy's magical voice again singing so gallantly:

"I will die cheering, if I needs must die;
So shall my last breath write upon my lips
Viva Italia."

"And you left him alone, knowing that he might—"

But the gruff doctor interrupted her.

"Yes, I left him alone, but asleep from a powder I gave him. Perhaps I am not such a brute as you think, and maybe I understand talented, wayward boys better than you dream. Also, he promised me not to carry out his threat until he had a talk with you. You suddenly appear to have been transformed into his Madonna of Rescue and of Pity," the big doctor ended grimly the moment before he assisted Sonya into her carriage, followed by Mollie Drew and Dolores King. And then he deliberately entered the second carriage with Nona Davis and Agatha Burton.

But Sonya was scarcely conscious of what became of him. She was fearing their new

acquaintance would not wait to talk with her. Better than other people could imagine she knew what it was to feel oneself a coward at a time when one longed to be a hero.

CHAPTER IV

Villa Felice

SONYA and Nona drove out of the Roman gate toward the hill country surrounding Florence.

They had arrived in Florence only a week before when the four Red Cross girls had immediately become members of the staff of the American Red Cross Hospital.

Sonya, however, had been living alone in a quiet pension, from whence most of the usual English, American and German guests had vanished at the entrance of Italy into the great war.

But now, on Nona's first afternoon of freedom, she and Sonya were on their way outside the city to search for a small villa which Sonya wished to rent for a few months.

Nona leaned back in the rickety carriage. She looked a little pale, but her blue eyes were wide open and shining.

"Italy is rather overwhelming, the more one sees of it, don't you think, Sonya?" she demanded, gazing backward at the wide, clear arch of the gate through which they had just passed, and then at the high-walled lane through which their carriage was slowly moving.

Sonya leaned over and took her companion's hand. She seemed a good deal more rested than the younger girl.

"It has been a trying week for you, I have no doubt, Nona, attempting to get settled and to begin your nursing at the hospital and I suppose to see as much of Florence as possible in your walks. That is why I have left you alone, and also to allow you to become more intimate with the other American nurses. I must not be selfish, but I rather wish you were to spend the next few months in idleness with me, instead of so hard at work. It is the country in Italy that is so enchanting; once one has seen all the great pictures and churches one can appreciate."

Nona laughed.

"I never knew any one so determined

upon idleness, Sonya. But I must confess I would not mind doing what you are planning, if I did not feel that Red Cross nursing was my duty. Besides, I have already missed you dreadfully this past week and have hundreds of questions to ask you? For one thing, whatever became of my—of your young Italian singer? For apparently he threw me over altogether for you after our arrival in Naples. Did he decide to go back to the United States after his inglorious beginning as a hero?"

Sonya had been watching the landscape as they drove out toward the exquisite hill country surrounding the city of Florence, which is said to be like a lily in the midst of a garden gay with flowers. Beyond them were the gray olive-clad hills and nearer, the sloping vineyard country. Over the walls clambered the thin, pale-green vines of the roses that a little later were to make Italy a glory of bloom.

Sonya frowned.

"Don't take that superior tone, Nona. You have acquired it from your friend Dr. Latham, who may be an excellent physician,

but whose sympathy I should never count upon in any disaster. You should have had enough experience with your nursing to know by this time that temporary cowardice means nothing, and particularly when one has the nervous temperament of an artist. Your young musician—not mine—is a soldier by this time, I have no doubt. He and I had a talk the morning before he left Naples. I told you he sent farewells, I assured him that we would be here in Florence for the summer—you girls at work, and I taking advantage of my age by doing nothing. He has promised to let me hear from him later on, but only in case he distinguishes himself. Poor Carlo, I presume vanity is another sign of the artistic temperament, but I rather fear if he waits for fame as a soldier we shall never hear of him! However, I don't wish to talk of Carlo, Nona, but of my villa."

"Your villa?"

Nona smiled. She was not accustomed to seeing her companion appear so young or so gay as this past week in Italy seemed to have made her.

"I did not dream you had acquired a villa so soon, Sonya. I thought we were going only to look at one which is to let. What is the use of my being taken along to offer advice if you have already decided what you intend doing?"

Sonya opened her pocketbook to look at a card.

"But I have not acquired anything yet, Nona, except the name of the villa and of the family who appear disposed to allow some one else to occupy their place. I don't know why, I am sure, except that people tell me since the war in Italy began all the foreigners have been running away to their own countries, until Italian property is about half its former value."

"Then, why this particular villa, Sonya, instead of another?" Nona inquired drowsily, not because she cared for any definite answer from her companion, but because it amused her to go on talking idly, when she was in a lovely state of relaxation from the strain of her work at the hospital, and happy to be again with Sonya.

There is no emotion of admiration and affection keener than the one a young girl is able to feel for an older woman, provided the older woman has charm and a wide experience of the world.

"Oh, for one reason, because I am charmed with the name of this villa—the Villa Felice, House of Happiness would be the English translation. I wonder if that is a good omen for me? I have not lived in a House of Happiness since I was a tiny girl and too young to realize what happiness meant." Perhaps that is why I am allowing myself to be lazy for a little while, when I ought of course to be helping, instead of loafing in lovely Italy."

Nona slipped her hand inside the older woman's caressingly.

"Oh, I am not in the least sure you are going to be so idle as you plan, Sonya. I'd like to bet with you a lovely string of coral I saw today in a shop in the Ponte Vecchio. that before many weeks you will be more occupied with some kind of work for Italy, even though it is not nursing, than any of the rest of our party."

Sonya shook her head.

"Don't try to excuse me in that way. But I do wish I knew how much English the Italian woman who is caretaker at the Villa Felice will know. It may be difficult for us to come to an agreement."

Then, for another ten or fifteen minutes, neither of the two friends attempted to speak, except for an occasional ejaculation.

It was a warm day of the blue and gold of Italy.

By and by the ancient cabman, who wore a top hat that looked as if it were used as a footstool or a trash basket when it was not serving as a hat, and a long blue coat down to his heels, turned from the long white lane through which he had been driving and entered a white stone gate.

Rising on a row of terraces in front of them, Nona and Sonya could see the gray turrets of the villa which had been described as the Villa Felice.

It was not a large house, but its size was what had particularly commended it to Sonya.

She and Nona got out of their cab, ask-

ing the driver to wait for them, and walked up the white path to the house.

The little villa had rather a pathetic, mysterious air, as if it had been deserted without understanding the cause.

In the nearby garden there were small clumps of cypress trees and tall vases of beautiful Italian pottery—the Signa pottery—in which were growing small orange and lemon trees.

Sonya and Nona stood for a moment in silence on the piazza, almost as if they were listening for some unexpected noise. Then Sonya raised the knocker and, letting it fall again, the sound made both of them involuntarily jump. It was almost as if the noise echoed through an empty house.

Sonya knew almost nothing in regard to the place she had come to see with the idea of renting it. A woman in the pension where she was boarding in Florence had recommended the villa to her. It had been the property of an acquaintance of hers, who had died just before the outbreak of the war. Later Sonya had seen the agent, who explained that the house was in charge

of a caretaker, and made an appointment for her visit.

Therefore, as a matter of fact, the house could not be so deserted as it appeared.

Moreover, the moment after her knocking, Sonya, and of course Nona, heard the reverberation of footsteps along the hall.

Sonya had been told that the caretaker was a woman—an old servant who had lived for many years with the former mistress—but the footsteps sounded as if they belonged to a man.

Both the newcomers felt a little nervous. Italy was an unknown country to both of them, and there was no one in sight. Even their former cabman, whom they had left at the bottom of the hill, had disappeared. Moreover, these were war times and, although they seemed at this moment far removed from any kind of conflict, there is not the same sense of security in any country engaged in war.

Nona, who did not feel herself particularly courageous in spite of her Red Cross experiences, put her hand lightly on her companion's arm, perhaps with the idea of

mutual protection, just as the front door opened.

However, they need not have been frightened, for the figure they now beheld behind the open door was a woman's, and yet as like a man's as her footsteps had suggested.

In a land where most of the peasant women were small and plump, Nannina was nearly six feet high, lean and flat of chest. She had deep-set dark eyes and a prominent nose, like a Cæsar's.

She did not appear like an ordinary servant. Both Sonya and Nona were immediately impressed by her strange manner and bearing.

She spoke a little English and gave her name, announcing that the two visitors were expected.

Then, without wasting more time, she started on a sight-seeing pilgrimage of the house.

"Yes, I have been living here twenty years," she replied in answer to a question from Nona, "the Donna Elizabetta, who is now dead" (and Nannina crossed herself), "she and I were girls at the same time."

But if the Italian serving woman was at present living in the Villa Felice there was nothing about the looks of the house, except its cleanliness, to suggest the fact. Everywhere it seemed dark and empty and cold.

Nevertheless when Nannina unbolted and opened the windows of the drawing-room, both Nona and Sonya uttered exclamations of pleasure.

Neither one of them had ever seen a room of just the same character.

The windows were leaded and arched and had low iron railings outside. The room itself was long and narrow, with a high ceiling, and the walls were of plaster, pale yellow in color, and hung with old pieces of tapestry. There was an oval mirror with a Florentine frame above the white Italian marble mantel, and on either side hung a portrait of a young girl. One picture must have been painted when she was about sixteen; the other when several years older. Then, upon the mantelpiece, in heavy bronze frames—one under each of the portraits—were the photographs of two Italian boys.

Nona found herself studying the two portraits and the two photographs, while Sonya made a more careful survey of the ancient beautiful furniture of the drawing-room.

"Could you imagine any more lovely place to rest and dream than this little house, Nona?" Sonya insisted, walking over and glancing out the window at the cypress-crowned row of terraces below her and at the blue rim of the Apenines in a far circle beyond. "But, of course, one must allow more air and sunshine to enter the house."

Nona frowned, not altogether sympathetically. She was tired and fighting a certain amount of envy, almost of condemnation, of Sonya for planning to enjoy the peace of this quiet villa, instead of being engaged in some form of relief work. It was true she had agreed with Sonya that she had earned a right to rest, while she herself kept on with her Red Cross work, but at present Nona could not help feeling that she was being the more virtuous in refusing Sonya's invitation to give up nurs-

ing and work in some quieter, less strenuous fashion here at the Villa Felice.

For it seemed to both of them a foregone conclusion that Sonya would rent the villa as soon as they started up the terrace and had the first view of the house.

"But aren't there any members of the Italian family left who formerly owned this place?" Nona inquired, almost as if she resented its desertion. "Surely your beautiful Donna Elizabetta did not live here alone before her death!"

The tall woman, who looked more like a grenadier than a maid, was drawing her hand softly over a carved table to see if it held a speck of dust, but at Nona's inquiry she nodded toward the mantel.

"Yes, there are two sons—the Signor Paulo, and the Signor Eugino Zoli. I look after this place for them. It is they who wish it rented."

Isn't there a girl in the family? Whose portraits are these?" Nona demanded, glancing up over the mantel, her curiosity still unsatisfied.

There was no reason why her question

should make any one angry, unless the Italian woman resented any curiosity in regard to her family. For in Italy there is so strong a feudal feeling that the servants of a house, if they have been a part of it for sufficiently long, feel themselves members of the same family.

Nona was continuing to gaze toward the portraits after her speech, so she did not notice that the peasant woman turned a deep crimson and that her eyes flashed with unexpected temper. But Sonya did observe her.

"The portraits are of the Donna Elizabetta. There are no daughters in the family," she returned sullenly.

Apparently Nona was not to be discouraged.

"What has become of the sons, then? Why do they wish to give up so charming a place?" she queried, showing more interest than good manners by her continuing questions.

The serving woman crossed herself again.

"They are at the war; where else should they be?" she returned. But this time,

although she spoke good-naturedly, Nona appreciated that her question had been both unnecessary and absurd. But then she had imagined the two boys whom she had seen in the photographs were of the ages their pictures represented.

As she followed the two older women out of the drawing-room to look over the other part of the villa, Nona made up her mind to remain quiet during the rest of their investigation of the house. After all, the villa was to be Sonya's and not hers!

Afterwards they went together into the dining-room and later up-stairs into three bed-rooms. These rooms were not attractive; the rugs were old and the curtains faded and colorless and the furniture dilapidated. Two of the rooms had evidently belonged to the young men in the family; the third, which was the largest, was evidently the apartment of the former mistress of the villa.

"I think I will have this room for mine, Nona," Sonya whispered. "I'll not be extravagant, but it will not take much money to make these bed-rooms at least

ordinarily pretty and livable. Which do you wish for yours?"

As Sonya made this remark she chanced to be standing at the entrance to one of the rooms. Across the small hall was another door, which had not been opened.

Nannina was inside one of the further rooms, adjusting a fallen curtain.

Without appreciating that she was doing anything she should not and, of course, supposing the house to be empty, Sonya suddenly stepped across the hall and turned the knob of the unexplored room.

Then she moved back with an exclamation of surprise and apology.

Nona was immediately behind her, but Sonya stood still.

This room was also a bed-room, but utterly different in its furnishings from the others. The walls of this room were painted a deep rose color, there were little white curtains at the odd-shaped windows, the bed had a fine white cover over it and the little table and dresser had tall brass candlesticks filled with fresh white candles. And standing in the center of the room, in a

quaint, old-fashioned dress, Nona saw one of the prettiest girls she had ever beheld in her life.

She looked as if she were only about fourteen or fifteen. Instead of being dark, as one imagines all Italians to be, she had long, fair hair, as light as Nona's, but her eyes were very soft and black with shadowy lashes.

She made a little curtsy to Sonya.

"I am sorry if I frightened you," she began, speaking perfect English, but looking very shy and frightened herself. "My mother told me to remain in here. She said the American ladies would not look into this room and later, if they took the villa, I could move away without troubling them."

"Your mother?" Nona found herself repeating stupidly. They had seen no one who could possibly be the mother of this exquisite girl.

CHAPTER V

Bianca

BUT by this time the Italian woman, Nannina, had joined the little group. Both Nona and Sonya observed that she seemed oddly disturbed.

Nevertheless she bowed respectfully to Sonya.

"This is my daughter's room," she began half sullenly and half apologetically. "I thought it would not matter if people looking over the house should not see this one room. I intended to tell you it was not to be shown to visitors. You may think it strange that my daughter should be living in this part of the house, now that the mistress and the masters are no longer at home, but this has been her room always. The Donna Elizabetta, having no daughter of her own, treated my child almost as if she were her own."

All the while this explanation was taking

place, Nona found her eyes turning from the figure of the Italian peasant woman to the girl. To Nona she appeared like a child—she was so small and delicately made and her manner was so timid and appealing. Really the idea that the girl could be this gaunt, fierce woman's daughter seemed ridiculously like a fairy story—the story of some lovely Princess being hidden away by a bad fairy.

"Bianca, will you show the ladies down to the piazza? I will bring them tea in a few moments," Nannina added in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone the next moment, when Sonya had apologized for her own impulsive action.

Then the two girls found their way to the piazza together, while the two older women lingered for the further discussion of the renting of the villa.

Nona felt a little nervous over what she and her unexpected acquaintance could have to say to each other. As she was so much the older, it seemed that the responsibility ought to be hers. Moreover, Bianca, whose first name was all she at present

knew, was evidently too shy to take the initiative.

However, Nona was mistaken. Even if the younger girl were shy, she had been too well brought up not to do whatever was proper.

She led Nona to a little collection of chairs at one end of the piazza, overlooking the terraced garden. She pointed out the best view, asked her guest if she were fatigued by her drive and then sat with her hands folded in her lap, as if she considered her duty entirely accomplished.

Nona felt both interested and amused by her companion. She could scarcely imagine an American girl with so much manner and at the same time so little. It was exactly as if Bianca had rehearsed a part, which she played as prettily as she knew how, but as if her real self were hidden.

Had she not been so pretty and the conditions of her life so unusual, Nona could not decide that she would not have been annoyed by her. American girls, above all other things, like other girls to be natural. They can even forgive their being crude

and making mistakes, so long as they are honest and genuine. But Bianca was a kind of puzzle; one could not understand her personality easily.

"It is very pleasant to find you speak English so well; we Americans are dreadfully stupid about foreign languages," Nona volunteered, by way of making conversation.

The Italian girl's lips parted. She had small, perfect white teeth.

"Oh," she returned politely, "that cannot be true! We are always told that the American girl is the cleverest and the most charming in the whole world. I speak English because the Donna Elizabetta was also an American woman. She taught us to speak her language from the time we were tiny children."

It occurred to Nona to wonder why the Italian girl spoke of "us" and of "we?" Then she remembered that Bianca probably included the two Italian boys, with whom she had grown up in a peculiar relation. It must have been as if they were the little Italian girl's brothers and

at the same time were no relation to her. Nona had a sudden vision of how hard the future might be for a girl as pretty as this one and brought up in the queer way she must have been.

"You are nursing the wounded Italian soldiers, are you not?" Bianca asked suddenly. "We Italians were so surprised at first by the American ladies coming over to help us. You see, in Italy, before this present war began, the Italian ladies did not nurse the sick. They left nursing to the peasants and to the Sisters of Charity. But now, since the English and the Americans and the French ladies have assisted in the care of the wounded, the Italian ladies are also working for them. I have told my mother this, for I wish I could be allowed to help."

"Oh, you are too young," Nona answered good naturedly and condescendingly. Naturally after two years of Red Cross nursing, she had a somewhat superior attitude toward any suggestion of amateur nursing, knowing as she now did just what expert care and skill the wounded soldiers re-

quired, and how much they had suffered from the well-meant but unskilful efforts at the beginning of the war.

"I am not so young as you think," the Italian girl returned; "I am already sixteen. Most persons believe I am younger. Of course I know I could not be a real Red Cross nurse, but there must be some work I can do. I get very tired remaining always idle, unless I am at work with my music or books. You see, my mother will not allow me to help her."

Nona had been permitting her mind to wander a little while the younger girl was talking. As a matter of fact, almost every girl she had met recently had confided her wish to become a Red Cross nurse, until Nona was weary of hearing them. Some might be in earnest, but most of them could not imagine the sacrifices and dangers and the being so deadly tired a good part of the time, that the business of nursing required. It was the romance—not the real work—which made the appeal.

Now Nona was not in the least interested in Bianca's expressed desire, but she was

interested in the girl's own history, which her few words had unfolded. Evidently the peasant woman was endeavoring to bring up her daughter to occupy a position entirely different from her own.

Nona could not help wondering just why she desired this, and how she expected to be successful. She would like to have known if there were any money for the girl's education, or if the friend who had been kind to her had made any plans for her future? But, of course, there was no way of finding out these things from a stranger, since good taste forbade one asking such intimate questions. Moreover, Nona did not feel that she understood enough of Italian society to appreciate how successful Nannina's efforts for her child might be. Even in the United States Bianca might have a difficult time, although now and then a girl of unusual beauty or ability was able to accomplish almost anything she desired with sufficient earnestness.

But did Bianca desire anything unusual for herself, or was the ambition only her mother's for her?

Nona was again glancing at the younger girl more curiously than one ordinarily does toward a stranger, when suddenly she saw her expression change.

A moment before she had been shy and serious; now her face flushed and she jumped up with unexpected animation.

"Gino and Paulo are coming!" she explained. "They promised, if it were possible, they would come to see if the American ladies desired to rent the villa. You will pardon me."

Nona watched the little girl run lightly down the stone walk between the terraces. For Bianca was so small it was difficult to remember or to believe she was sixteen years old.

At almost the same time Nona also discovered two young men approaching.

They were unlike in appearance; one of them tall and slender with the dark hair and eyes and the well-cut features one expects in an Italian of gentle breeding. The other, who held his cap in his hand, had gold-brown hair and a small, closely trimmed beard. He was probably the older,

although there did not appear to be much difference in the ages of the two brothers. But it was to him Bianca evidently addressed her story, and she came up to the house with her hand in his.

Both young men were dressed in the khaki service uniforms of the Italian soldier. But Nona recognized that the older one of them was an aviator.

Almost at once they walked up on the piazza to speak to her, Bianca having evidently explained her presence. And, fortunately, Sonya joined them, while Bianca was introducing her two foster brothers.

The older of the two men, whom Bianca called Gino, was the one to whom Nona felt attracted, although he was less handsome than his brother. But on closer observation she saw that he had wide-open, warm, steel-gray eyes with a humorous expression. Also his manner was friendly and charming.

He and Sonya did the greater part of the talking.

"I am sure my brother and I shall be most happy to have two Americans occupy

our home if you are pleased. My mother was also an American and we therefore feel ourselves partly so," he added, looking so unlike an American at the moment that Sonya smiled.

"But I am not an American and, although Miss Davis is, I'm afraid she is not going to live here with me, although she has promised to be with me whenever it is possible. You see, she has come to Italy to help with the nursing at the American Red Cross Hospital in Florence."

"Then one of us may some day have the good fortune to have you as a nurse," the younger of the two young men interrupted. Bianca spoke to him as "Paulo." He seemed to Nona to show more gallantry than common sense.

She shook her head in a disturbed fashion.

"I hope not. You see, I have been nursing since the early part of the present war and I often wonder why nearly all soldiers speak so lightly of being wounded. I am afraid they don't know what we nurses do."

She turned to the older brother.

"You are an aviator, Signor Zoli?"

But Paulo again interrupted. Either he was very talkative, or else he did not intend having the American girl's attention turned solely upon his brother.

"Oh, Gino chose the air for his soldiering because it is the easiest job in Italy these days. You see, he is an artist when he is not a soldier and, whatever he may tell you, he does not like roughing it. I wonder if you realize that the war between the Italian and Austrian soldiers is being fought at present in the Trentino in the highest altitude that war has ever been known."

"Yes, and Paulo belongs to the Alps Brigade—the Hunters of the Alps. Garabaldi's grandsons are in the same brigade," the older brother answered, smiling with a kind of good-natured carelessness.

It seemed to Nona that this good-natured carelessness was a marked characteristic of his. She noticed it in his manner toward Bianca, who in spite of her reserve did not fail to reveal her preference for him. He treated her as one might a younger sister, but showed her no special attention or affection.

As a matter of fact, it seemed to be Paulo who was more interested and fonder of the little girl. Several times during the general conversation he would lean over and say something which was intended only for her. Once, when he supposed no one to be observing them, he drew out a little box and handed it to her. Later Nona saw the girl's delicately fair cheeks flush as she opened the box and pinned a tiny spray of pink coral in her old-fashioned muslin dress.

When Nannina finally appeared with the tea tray, Nona and Sonya were both interested to see how the little girl would behave, and if she would make any effort to assist her mother.

But Bianca behaved exactly as if she were the real daughter of the house. She took her place behind the tea table, serving the tea as only a well brought up foreign girl could. Whatever she wished she asked Nannina for politely but did not attempt to relieve her in any way.

And the two young men seemed to take her attitude as entirely a matter of course.

They were evidently accustomed to having Bianca behave exactly as she did behave.

Nona Davis was not at all sure that she liked or approved of the situation.

On the way back to Florence, Sonya remarked carelessly:

"Oh, Nona, I did not have the opportunity to tell you, but the Italian woman, Nannina, has promised to stay on at the Villa Felice as my housekeeper. It will be splendid for me to have some one who knows the neighborhood and the customs of the country. Besides, I suppose she would feel rather desolate to be turned out of a place in which she has lived so long. I spoke of her staying to the two Signors and they appeared much relieved. I presume Nannina's future has been a problem for them."

"Nannia's future? I should think Bianca's future would be more serious," Nona answered a little irritably. "I wonder, Sonya, if you have thought just what you will do having Bianca in the same house with you under the peculiar conditions in which she lives. Are you also going to adopt her as your daughter?"

There was no doubting the fact that Nona was jealous of the possible situation ahead. Not in the least did she enjoy the idea of Sonya's having another girl living with her, as she had been doing since their return from Russia. Moreover, Bianca was extraordinarily pretty and appealing. She was the gentle, exquisite type of girl for whom most people do a great deal under the impression that a girl of this character can do little except be lovely. Nona was too American to like this idea.

But Sonya must have understood, for she put her arm about the younger girl.

"Don't be silly, Nona! Yes, Bianca may be a problem. I think I had scarcely thought of how much of a one she might be, I was so anxious to have the service of her mother. Still, there must be a plan of some kind for the girl's future. She cannot go on living as she has in the past. Now that I think of her, I really feel extremely sorry for the child."

CHAPTER VI

Guests at Sonya's Villa

AS the days passed, Nona and the three American girls who had crossed on the steamer with her, became even more deeply interested in their work at the American Hospital.

Naturally at first many things in Italy appeared foreign and unusual to them. But a little later on, Nona, who had more European experience than the others, began to appreciate that there was actually a greater degree of the real American atmosphere in Florence than in any city in Europe in which she had so far nursed. And this was because so many of her own country people ordinarily live in Florence. As a matter of fact, in time of peace Florence is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Europe.

Many persons beside Americans, English and Germans as well—lovers of the

arts of the past more than of those of the present, and possessing small incomes of which they wish to make the most—have for many years chosen Florence as their home, the city of Boccaccio, of Dante and Michael Angelo, and later of the beautiful married life of Elizabeth and Robert Browning.

However, when Italy cast in her fortunes with the Entente Allies, the greater number of foreigners departed from her cities, and, as Germany had become an enemy country, it was presumed that all the Germans were scattered.

But Nona was pleased to discover that at least there remained in the city of Florence a sufficient number of her own countrymen to make her feel remarkably comfortable and at home, and they were also wonderfully hospitable and cordial to all the newcomers. The hospital where she was nursing was of course entirely run by American funds and had a distinguished American physician at its head.

Moreover, each day Nona used to watch charming American women coming into the

hospital with gifts of books and flowers and food for the wounded soldiers. Now and then entering a room unexpectedly to take a temperature or to administer a dose of medicine, it struck Nona that she might possibly be interrupting a romance. What she would see would have represented a romance in the United States or in England, or in any Anglo-Saxon land, for the dark eyes of the soldier would be gazing ardently toward his woman or girl visitor, and his entire expression would represent admiration, if not something approaching adoration. But Nona was yet to learn to understand the Latin temperament, to know that Italians are natural flatterers of women, and that it is not possible they can mean all that they may say.

But at present Nona learned that one of the greatest hardships which the war had brought upon Florence was the increasing poverty of the city. As Florence depended so largely upon her foreign population, their disappearance meant for her a heavy loss. So once or twice Nona wrote Sonya not to worry over failing for the present to

assist with the war work, since at least she was aiding the cause a little by spending her money in Italy.

Nona also endeavored to persuade Dr. Latham to this same point of view in order to disarm his criticism of her friend. But apparently he was obdurate.

The big doctor, as the American girls continued to call him, had also established himself temporarily at the American Hospital in Florence. He was working there with the other surgeons, interesting them in his new discovery for the treatment of infected wounds. Later he intended to go to other hospitals nearer the Italian front.

It chanced that Sonya had never come in contact with Dr. Latham since their accidental meeting in the tea gardens in Naples; therefore she had never spoken to him of the conversation she had with the young Italian singer, Carlo Navara, at his suggestion.

Nevertheless, Sonya was delighted to hear, through Nona, of the American physician's presence at the same hospital. For,

however brusque and disagreeable his manner had been to her in their few meetings, she knew that he would watch over Nona and the new Red Cross girls with especial interest.

She was grateful for this, because until recently she had not been separated from Nona in more than a year, and now, while Nona continued her Red Cross nursing in Florence, it might be possible to see but little of her.

For a few days after her first visit to the Villa Felice, Sonya had taken the house and moved out there. As a matter of fact, she had not been into the city a single time since.

However, in Sonya's surmise that the American doctor would be particularly interested in the four new Red Cross nurses, apparently she had been correct. There were times when Nona was almost surprised by the interest he seemed to take in her. Whenever she had a free hour he appeared to like to be allowed to spend it with her, either in sightseeing, or in visiting new acquaintances who asked them in

for afternoon tea. But Nona decided that, although Doctor Latham was almost old enough to be her father, nevertheless he must be lonely and wished some one to amuse him. However, there were times when she would rather have preferred his finding some one beside herself. For Florence contains probably the two greatest picture galleries in the world—the Ufizzi and the Pitti Galleries—and, as Nona was intensely interested in pictures, she would have liked to spend many of her free hours in them. But unfortunately Dr. Latham was as scornful of artists as he was of the idle rich. The fact that their work had been preserved through the centuries and represented many hundreds of thousands of dollars did not affect his opinion in the least. Artists—ancient or modern—he announced to be "a poor lot."

However, one morning when Sonya had been settled at her Italian villa for about ten days, Nona received a note from her. The note asked, if it were possible, for Nona and the three girls—Dolores King, Mollie Drew and Agatha Burton—to drive out to spend the afternoon with her.

The note further explained that the two young Italian owners of the Villa Felice, whom Nona had previously met, having a leave of absence from the front, were then visiting friends in the same neighborhood. As they were anxious to know American girls, they were coming to tea, and were to bring several of their friends.

Immediately on reading Sonya's letter, the invitation struck Nona as extremely agreeable. She was, of course, anxious to see Sonya as soon as possible and to find out how she had arranged her small but not altogether simple household, since it was formed of so strange a combination as Bianca and Bianca's mother. Moreover, Nona frankly confessed to herself that she had enjoyed meeting the two Italian signors and that she had particularly liked the older one, whom she had since thought of as the artist-soldier.

Moreover, she knew that the three other girls would be pleased by the opportunity of an afternoon of freedom and the experience of an Italian tea party. Several times Mollie Drew had remarked lately that she

hoped Sonya, whom she called "The Beautiful Lady," had not forgotten them.

As soon as it was possible to leave her work, Nona slipped away on a pilgrimage to find the other three girls and to deliver Sonya's message.

She was passing the open door of one of the wards when unexpectedly Dr. Latham stepped out into the hall.

Nona thought he looked uncommonly grave even for the big doctor, whose expression was usually serious. However, his expression changed when he caught sight of her.

"You are the very person I was thinking of," he announced unexpectedly.

Fortunately Nona had no idea of how pretty she appeared in her Red Cross uniform, which is, however, an extremely becoming costume for most girls and women.

And Nona had grown much prettier in the last year of her return to her old home in South Carolina with Sonya. For the first time since she could remember there had been another woman in her home whom she could love and who also cared for her.

For Nona had almost no recollection of her own mother, who had died under strange circumstances when she was a little girl. The rest also had been good for her and the freedom from care, for Sonya still had sufficient money invested in the United States for them to live upon comfortably.

Therefore Nona had lost the too ethereal look which she had revealed upon the day of her first meeting with the original Red Cross girls, Barbara, Mildred and Eugenia. Her pallor had disappeared, so that now she often had real color in her cheeks, and her thinness could be called slenderness.

Moreover, she had more vivacity and self-assurance, for Sonya's influence and affection had done much for her.

Nona stopped, of course, when Dr. Latham spoke to her, although showing that she was in a hurry to move on as soon as possible again.

"I want you to promise to spend your free time in the Boboli Gardens with me this afternoon. These warm Florentine spring days are so enchanting they even affect an old fellow like me," he continued.

Nona shook her head.

"Sorry, but I have another engagement," she answered, careless at first. Then noticing his disappointment, she was more sympathetic. After all, why not take Dr. Latham along with them to Sonya's? It might be pleasant to have a masculine escort. Moreover, she liked and admired the big doctor so much; it was nonsensical that he and Sonya should continue to be prejudiced.

As a matter of fact, Nona knew that Sonya's feeling against Dr. Latham was not very deep one way or the other. He had not attracted her and at present she did not wish to be annoyed by strangers.

She had been forced to know so many people in her crowded life that now she wished to be alone whenever it was possible and to take a holiday from them.

But Dr. Latham might not be so easy to influence.

However, Nona made up her mind to ask him to go with them.

He was obstinate at first.

"But I don't like your friend and she

does not like me, and as she has not asked me and I don't drink tea, just why should I go?" he demanded.

But Nona only laughed.

"Why, to please me."

And although Dr. Latham growled something or other none too polite to Sonya in return, Nona knew he intended to do what she wished.

"I've got one condition," he added. "I'm going to make another effort to make that friend of your's useful to us in our Red Cross work."

As Nona was anxious to be off she nodded her head.

"Oh, persuade Sonya to anything you like, if you think that you can manage her. But I wish she would let me tell you her real history. Then you would not do her the injustice to think she is merely idling in Italy for no reason."

Without waiting for any more conversation, Nona then disappeared.

It was a task to find the other three girls and to deliver Sonya's invitation at a moment when they were not too busy to

listen. However, after this was accomplished, the superintendent of the hospital was kind enough to allow the four new Red Cross girls a holiday for the entire afternoon. She wished to make their stay in Florence as agreeable as possible without interfering too much with their work, and just at present the hospital was not crowded.

During her second drive to the Villa Felice, Nona felt as if she were already familiar with the landscape and enjoyed pointing out its beauties to her four companions.

As they walked up the path, they found Sonya, whose other guests had already arrived, sitting with them on the green slope of lawn before her villa and surrounded by its ornamental lemon and orange trees.

There were four Italian soldiers present this afternoon and another girl. Nona could not be sure of her age, as she was wearing a big, flopping Leghorn hat which partly concealed her face.

Bianca was with them, too, but she was a little back from the others, with her hands folded in her lap in the demure fashion which seemed characteristic of her.

Sonya came quickly forward to meet her new guests. She was especially cordial to Dr. Latham, as Nona guessed she would be under the circumstances. One can never be rude to a guest in one's own house under any circumstances, and, moreover, Sonya had really almost forgotten her attitude toward the American doctor in their earlier acquaintance.

Nona noticed that Bianca waited quietly until the other introductions were accomplished and then came forward to greet her and to meet the others. Her manners were just as self-possessed and she seemed as much at home as during their first meeting. However, when the introductions were over, she went back to her place and sat down quietly again, attempting to take no part in the general conversation. Yet Nona could not help glancing curiously toward the younger girl now and then and wondering why she seemed so unlike any American girl of her age whom she had ever known.

However, she could not give much attention to Bianca.

Nona was also entertained by the pleasure Dr. Latham showed in Sonya's unexpected cordiality to him. He thawed as most men do under a charming woman's influence.

Indeed, Sonya saw that the entire company made much of the American doctor. And although he laughed and protested somewhat brusquely at the compliments which were paid him, no one really objects to being treated as a hero.

Of course, during the first part of their visit, the conversation among Sonya's guests was general. However, Nona was pleased because, as soon as it was possible, Signor Zoli came over and quietly took the chair next to hers.

She thought he looked more agreeable than ever and unlike what she had expected of an Italian, with his tiny pointed beard, his golden-brown hair and his skin almost the same color.

If Nona had not seen so much of the soldiers of the Allied nations during the present war she might have been surprised at Signor Eugino's apparent gayety. But this seems ever a part of the soldier's

strange profession, that, when not engaged in actual service, they are ever the merriest and most sweet-tempered of men.

"It is good to see you again," he said at the first opportunity to speak to Nona without the others hearing. "My brother and I have been again to call on your friend, and our villa seems more like home than it has since my mother's death. We chance to be having a leave of absence from the front and are staying with the Princess Carnia, who is an old friend."

Nona must have looked a little surprised, because her companion laughed.

"Oh, the Princess comes from Chicago, but she is a Princess nevertheless. Her husband, who was very much older, is dead."

The Princess Carnia was Sonya's other guest, whom Nona had first thought to be a girl.

She realized now that she was a little older than she had seemed at first, although she could not be much over twenty.

"The Princess has a large fortune in sausage or something," the young Italian

artist went on explaining good-naturedly for Nona's benefit. "So her mother, who was a very ambitious American lady, married her to the Prince when Laura was not eighteen. Forgive my using her first name, but our mothers were old friends and my brother and I have known her ever since she first came to Italy."

Nona looked across at the stranger with greater interest. She did not think she was either pretty or attractive in her manner. She had rather small dark eyes and a large nose and a restless fashion of talking.

However, her companion went on talking and attracted her attention again.

"I wonder, if you have the opportunity later, if you will come to look at my studio with me some time this afternoon. I have been spending a few hours there every day during my leave. It is not far away. You see, I had a tumble out of my airship a short while ago and I've been waiting around until I was thoroughly mended. So I have been working in my studio, now and then, as much to kill time as for any other reason.

Nona nodded.

"I'll come with you with pleasure, I should like very much to see an Italian studio," she returned cordially.

But at this moment Nannina, the Italian housekeeper, appeared with the tea tray. She placed it before Sonya, who began acting as hostess.

But before Nona could suggest that she be allowed to assist, Bianca had stepped quietly forward and Nona saw that Sonya seemed to enjoy the younger girl's deft helpfulness. She was a little annoyed, but made no effort to take Bianca's place.

Yet Nona wondered a little jealously what Sonya's feeling toward Bianca had grown to be, after living in the house with her for a number of days.

When tea was finished, fortunately Paulo Zoli suggested that they all walk about the grounds for a time.

He and Dolores King already appeared to have taken a decided fancy to each other. But then Dolores was the type of vivacious southern girl who is always attractive to men. One could also readily imagine that

Paulo had the usual Latin temperament, which means he was a natural admirer of all attractive girls.

Nona felt that his older brother had a different nature, and was more like an American. For, in all Nona's experiences among foreigners, she had remained true to the idea that she could never really care seriously for any man, except one of her own countryman.

She had been surprised by Eugenia's marriage to a Frenchman and more, perhaps, by Mildred Thornton's engagement to a Russian General. Personally she had, of course, always liked Dick Thornton, so that Barbara had once believed she had been half-way in love with him. But, although Nona had quite recovered from any fancy for Dick, Barbara's marriage to Richard Thornton was the one of the marriages of the original three Red Cross girls which she could understand and approve.

Therefore, Nona's promise to Sonya that she would not allow herself to become interested in an Italian was certainly made in entire good faith.

The moment following Paulo's suggestion the four American Red Cross girls and the four young soldiers started off toward the left of the villa.

The Princess chanced to be talking to Sonya and Dr. Latham. They insisted they had no desire to be disturbed.

Nona glanced toward Bianca, feeling as if it were unkind to leave the younger girl sitting there alone, without asking her to accompany them. Would she not feel wounded by the neglect?

However, Bianca did not even glance toward them and, as her foster brothers made no effort to include her, Nona went on without knowing exactly what to do.

Ten minutes later she found herself standing alone with Eugino Zoli outside his studio.

How he had managed to separate her from the others she was not sure.

Nona had an instant of thinking that Sonya might not be pleased. But, then, Sonya was unnecessarily particular, and besides she was no longer a child. Moreover, Sonya must like the two brothers or she would not be so friendly with them.

Outside, the studio building was of cheap wooden boards, but wild vines had been trained over it so as almost entirely to cover the framework.

However, Nona was scarcely prepared for the charm of the room on the inside. It must have been forty feet long, with a high arched ceiling, and had a great north window facing the light.

For furniture there was an immense divan covered with worn but exquisite pieces of tapestry; a table and tall chairs carved with the heads of cherubs and the insignia of old Florentine families. There were half a dozen easels standing about, with the painted side of the canvas turned away. But on the walls were a number of paintings which looked like old masters to Nona, except that they did not bear the magic names of the great artists.

But the greatest charm of the room was the glow of deep yet subdued color. It seemed to have a strange influence upon Nona. She felt as if she were moving in a pleasant dream.

"But won't you show me some of your

own work now?" she asked, after her companion had pointed out what he considered the best things in his collection.

"I got them all for a song," he had explained boyishly, "and some of them really are rather good."

As a matter of fact, Nona was beginning to realize that the young Italian was younger than she had at first thought, from his manner and appearance. He was actually twenty-two, but his close-cut foreign beard did make him look older; then, as the eldest son, he had been in a measure the head of the house after his father's death.

"I'll show you my work with pleasure. I really do want you to see it. I suppose that is one of the reasons why I asked you to come here to the studio with me. Of course, it seems absurd for any one to attempt to be an artist in Florence today, but, after all, that is the work I love best, however poorly I may succeed," he concluded, with what Nona considered an attractive modesty.

However, it seemed to Nona that Eugino

Zoli's work was charming, although she realized that she was not an altogether competent or unprejudiced judge. But his paintings represented interiors of old churches in Italy, odd bits of the Florentine landscape, such as a fragment of wall covered with a vine, and a figure of a nymph or faun standing in the foreground.

"This is my last sketch, which I made one day when I was loafing back of the line in the Trentino," the young man said finally, leaning over and pulling a sketch out of a large portfolio which was lying carelessly upon the floor.

He handed the sketch to Nona and she saw the outline of a tall, blue mountain with its crown covered with snow. Above it the sky was of the wonderful Italian blue. Caught up almost in the clouds was what looked like a giant white bird pausing for an instant before swooping lower toward the valley. But Nona, of course, recognized the outline of an airship.

"It is a sketch of a friend of mine, reconnoitering over the Austrian lines. He was killed later that same day," the artist explained.

Nona was embarrassed by her own emotion, because of course in these war times the first thing each one of us should learn is self-control. And, unexpectedly, her eyes had filled with tears.

"It is a beautiful piece of work; I should think you would value it very much," she said slowly. "I don't know why, but it makes me recall a song I have always loved, 'The Wings of a Dove,' It is as if your friend had flown away into his eternal rest."

Nona was not looking at her companion, but she was surprised to hear him say suddenly:

"I wonder if you would care to keep this sketch. If it pleases you I would like you to have it. Perhaps you may remember me by it, because it happens to suggest the two things I am most interested in at the present time."

Nona flushed, partly with surprise, but more with pleasure in her gift. She did not know when anything had pleased her more.

"You are wonderfully kind, but do you think I ought to have anything so valuable,"

she was saying, when she heard a slight noise at the open door.

Glancing up Nona saw that it was Bianca. Today she was wearing a white dress which was really suitable for a much younger girl and made her look more like a child than ever. It was of sheer white muslin and lace, with a short waist and a deep full skirt. Her hair, curled in half a dozen big, loose curls, was caught back with a black velvet ribbon. She was extraordinarily pretty, and yet it seemed to Nona Bianca could not be so old as she had said.

She made her little curtsy as if she were yet a child.

"The Signora says will you please return to the villa at once. It is growing late," she declared, as if she were repeating Sonya's exact words.

Nona got up hurriedly. She was not surprised by the message, nor did she stop to wonder how Sonya could have known of her presence in the studio.

Indeed, she was suddenly worried as to whether Sonya would be really angry. After all, she knew nothing of Italian cus-

toms. Perhaps she had been wrong to spend this quarter of an hour alone with so new an acquaintance. However, as Nona held firmly to her picture, she could not altogether regret her indiscretion. She had had a pleasant talk and a lovely gift, and there was really nothing to regret.

However, she was glad that Sonya had no opportunity to speak to her alone or to ask questions.

Sonya happened to be too much occupied with her farewells to her other guests.

Evidently Dr. Latham had carried out his threat, for she was laughing and at the same time protesting over something he must have lately said to her.

"But I told you, Dr. Latham, that I had come to Italy to rest—not to help with the relief work among the soldiers for the present. If you turn my house into a convalescent home, it seems to me I may have rather more to do than the rest of you. And, though you may not believe me, I have earned a holiday."

"Just the same, if I find a few Italian boys who need a place just like the Villa

Felice, where they can rest and grow strong, I've half an idea you will not turn them away," Dr. Latham added obstinately.

But Nona saw that his opinion of Sonya had altered for the time being, at least. However much he might decide to dislike her tomorrow, he was under the influence of her charm at this moment.

"By the way, whatever became of the young Italian boy—the singer—whom I turned over to you in Naples? Did he return to the United States, or did you transform him into a real soldier by a few words of encouragement?" he continued.

But Sonya had no opportunity to reply, for other farewells had to be said at this instant.

So far as Nona and Sonya were concerned, their only private talk with each other was when Sonya whispered at parting:

"Am I never to see you alone, dear? There are so many questions I want to ask—so many things I have to tell you. But please don't overwork. I am missing you dreadfully."

CHAPTER VII

The Italian Singer

IT was night in the Trentino. The Italian soldiers had been told that an attack was to be made by them at dawn.

Ten thousand feet above, in their nests amid eternal snows, the Austrian and German soldiers were to be forced into the open.

In his dugout behind the Italian intrenchments, the young Italian singer, who had crossed on the torpedoed ship with the Red Cross girls, lay awaiting the summons to charge up the Alpine passes with the breaking of the day.

Some of the soldiers slept with their guns in their hands, but Carlo had no idea of being able to sleep during the long night. For the morning was to bring the great test of his life—his first experience in fighting.

Sooner than he anticipated, Carlo Navara,

whose plan had been to become a great artist—never a soldier—had been sent to the Italian front.

However, for almost two years, while struggling to make up his mind to return to Italy and offer his services to the government, Carlo had been at work in his free hours learning all that he could of the uncongenial tasks of soldiering.

For many men and boys, beside Carlo Navara, hate the life and the work of a soldier; it is idle to believe they do not, or that all men are equally fitted for it. Only they must—as Carlo had—learn to fight from a sense of duty and a sense of loyalty. For so long as there are nations and men in the world who still believe in war, so long even those who believe in peace must offer themselves for universal service. For no man can allow another man's courage and devotion to make the world a safe place for the shirker.

Now Carlo had time for considering many things.

In the first place, why had he regarded himself as an Italian rather than an Ameri-

can? It was true he had been born in southern Italy and lived there as a small boy. But, almost ever since he could remember clearly, his home had been in New York City. And he loved the United States best.

Tonight he recalled the tiny Italian fruit shop over which he and his mother and father lived in New York. He had sometimes been ashamed of the neighborhood, since he had made new friends among fashionable people and had started upon his career as an artist. But tonight Carlo would have given a great deal to have been under the little tenement shelter—to have breathed again the mingled odors of oranges and pineapples and bananas rising from the shop below. At home he used to dream of the day when his voice would make him a great fortune, when he would move the little old mother and father to some sumptuous place, where, although he might never know it, they would probably be perfectly miserable. But now he feared that not only might he never attain the rich home, but that he might never see the humble one again.

Carlo shifted his position; the night was cold—so cold that it made him think of the evenings when he had first begun singing in the New York City streets and waiting for the showers of pennies and nickels and dimes to fall from the windows of apartment houses and hotels. For they had always followed his songs. But this was, of course, before his discovery by the friend who had made a splendid musical future possible for him.

For, since then, Carlo had taken the greatest possible care of his voice; never exposing himself to damp air when it was avoidable; never singing except when his master gave permission and then only the songs he chose for him.

Yet here he was tonight so cold that his voice felt frozen in his throat. Even should he escape other injury, perhaps he might never be able to sing again. Yet the greatest living Italian tenor had called his "a golden voice" and had predicted that some day he, Carlo Navara, would fill his high place in the world of great singers.

So it was small wonder, and perhaps not

so reprehensible, that the young soldier felt himself beaten by waves of self-pity, and now and then by regret. He had not been forced to come to Italy. He had chosen the duty voluntarily, for he had always intended becoming a United States citizen. And he still intended to do this if he ever got safely back to America.

Nevertheless Italy had called him and he had answered the call.

So tonight Carlo in the darkness trying to fortify his courage repeated softly to himself the words of a great French writer —Anatole France:

"Beautiful Italy, which I have loved all my life—loved for her nature and her genius—loved for her cypress-crowned hills, her mountains of terebinthine shade, or, bare under the sun that gilds them—those other mountains whose very names set generous hearts a-throb."

Then, looking up at those mountains where, on the farther side, other boys like himself lay thrusting out of mind their old dreams, Carlo allowed himself to cry softly in the dark.

He was ashamed; he hated himself for his tears, but no one would know! Everything about them at present was so deadly quiet.

Carlo lay in the second line of trenches; the artillery which was to clear the ground ahead at daybreak was behind the third line.

Then, suddenly, in the midst of his shame and of his self-pity, Carlo recalled the final words a stranger had said to him a few weeks before in Naples.

"You must remember that many people —and usually the finest ones—are frightened before the *great* moments of their lives. You are ashamed because you are fearful over the thought of facing your first battle. Will you not also suffer equally when you face your first great audience as a singer? And yet you will not be ashamed of this, because you can say that will be a spiritual, not a physical, fear.

"But there is no reason why you should be more ashamed of one than of the other, so long as you master it."

"She was a wonderful woman—this Sonya Valesky!"

Ever since first seeing her on board ship, Carlo had been attracted by her.

It was for this reason he had tried to make friends with the young southern girl—Miss Davis—in order that he might through her come to know her friend.

However, the older woman had apparently not wished to make acquaintances on ship board. For it was not until the night of their disaster, when his timidity had filled the other passengers with dislike, that she had been so extraordinarily kind to him.

Afterwards there had been only the hour when they had talked together alone in the little pension in Naples. It was there that Madame Valesky had told him more of her own history than she wished any of their fellow travelers to know, trusting him to keep her secret. For she wished him to realize that, in her own past days in Russia, when she had been fighting with her small powers against the autocratic might of the Russian government, she too had frequently been afraid—had longed to give up and turn her back upon the mission she had set out to accomplish.

In the darkness Carlo remembered the friendliness of her final hand clasp and her voice at parting.

"Remember, if you have it in you to become a great artist, it is necessary that you feel more deeply and suffer more intensely than other men. But the artist who allows these emotions to conquer him never becomes truly great."

Then Carlo dozed a little. Yet in his sleep he seemed to be singing the song that had restored his courage on that black night in the open sea.

> "I will die cheering, if I needs must die;
> So shall my last breath write upon my lips
> Viva Italia."

Then, once later—it must have been in the last hours before daybreak—the young Italian believed he heard, although through a kind of stupor, the song of the Italian nightingale. Yet this was scarcely possible, for the nightingale belongs to the south, and this was northern Italy.

However, before the first real light in the sky, Carlo was fully awakened by the

noise of the first guns of the Italian artillery firing from the rear.

They boomed and thundered and shrieked, until all life became only a vast combination of impossible noises, and all the senses only the one sense of hearing.

With such an awakening Carlo had no return of the fear which had haunted him through the night.

In rigid silence he waited like all the other soldiers, feeling himself only a human machine. Any instant a common command would come, then, just as if a finger had touched the trigger of his life, he would spring forward to follow its bidding.

Now the captain of his brigade, passing along the line of his soldiers, with his watch in hand, whispered words of encouragement to his boys, preparing them for their moment of action.

The boys from the first line of trenches ahead were already struggling up the steep hill, while back in the mountains the Austrian cannon was returning the cannonading, crashing like the thunder among Rip Van Winkle's haunted hills.

Then, when Carlo's order to charge came, climbing out of his hole, he, too, gallantly ran forward up the long incline together with his companions.

Truly there was a rain of bullets from the mountain top above. And now and then a piece of shrapnel bursting fell, diging a deep cave in the side of the hill.

However, the Italian airmen had located the enemy's lines in many days of flying over the Austrian intrenchments.

Therefore the charge of the Italian brigades up the mountain side was not the madness it appeared. Unprepared for their attack, and taken by surprise, the Austrians many times fired over their heads.

But Carlo, no longer remembering his past fears, and thinking nothing of his danger but only of his work as an individual soldier, plunged bravely up the mountain. Half-way up he began firing at the descending Austrian soldiers who were returning his charge.

Several times in the steep climbing he stumbled; once he fell. At intervals Carlo would kneel to reload his rifle, but never

once did he falter, or feel the least desire to hide or to turn back.

Instead, shouting and singing "Viva Italia;" with his dark head thrown bravely up, he kept gallantly ahead. Other young soldiers in his neighborhood following him, took up his battle cry.

Then, all of a sudden, and of course with no warning, a gray bullet struck Carlo. At the instant he had not much sense of pain—only a burning, stinging sensation in his throat and a sudden loss of breath. But this was because his time of consciousness was so short.

Almost immediately the young Italian boy reeled backward and, sliding down the hill, his body rested in a deep hole made by a bursting shrapnel.

There was no opportunity for his soldier companions to stop to see if he were dead. For not until nightfall did the fighting cease. Then the Italians had taken many hundred prisoners.

It was after this that the ambulance men went out to do their work of rescue. They found Carlo, but for a moment they stood

arguing whether it were worth while to carry him back behind the lines.

"There isn't one chance in a hundred," one of the men said.

"Well, if there is that, we'll give the poor fellow a show," the other answered.

So they carried Carlo gently down the steep hill. But they need not have been so careful, since he felt nothing.

They left him at the nearest emergency hospital, but when they went away again were still unaware whether he were living or dead. There was not time to find out. Other wounded men were waiting up on the hill.

CHAPTER VIII

A New Patient

SOME new patients had arrived at the American Hospital during the night, who had been assigned to the care of Nona Davis.

They had been sent to Florence from one of the hospitals nearer the front, in order that they might have more attention showed them.

These soldiers were ordinarily expected to recover. Therefore they were usually difficult patients, and because Nona Davis had a reputation for keeping the convalescent men more cheerful and more content than most of the other nurses, she was frequently assigned to this duty.

However, Nona did not particularly enjoy the task, nor did she think she was so well fitted for it as her hospital superiors considered her.

It was now summer, and the heat in

Florence was growing difficult to bear when one must be on their feet and at work the greater part of each day.

Nona had not slept very well the night before. But this morning, as she came into her ward at about nine o'clock when her day's work began, she tried to appear as if her own health were a thing no nurse ever had to consider.

The poor fellows who had just arrived would probably be worn out from their journey, and some of them dissatisfied with their change of environment.

Their particular ward was a long room with beds on either side. But it happened that there were only six new patients who had come in the night before.

From one of the new beds to the other Nona moved quietly. In reality she was introducing herself and trying to find out as much as she could of the characters of the wounded men and the extent of their injuries, before starting upon her actual work.

Another nurse, who had since gone off duty, had given the wounded men their

breakfasts. One of the volunteer male nurses had helped them with whatever toilets they were able to make before the morning visit from the doctor.

So most of the new patients were sitting up and appeared remarkably cheerful.

In her weeks in Florence, Nona had succeeded in learning a little more Italian than she had known on her departure from New York. Nevertheless her efforts to speak Italian properly still afforded many of her soldier patients so much amusement that Nona felt it would be a mistake to learn to speak really correctly.

"Buon giorno, Signora," was always her morning's greeting from each one of the men, and yet Nona had never become so well accustomed to this simple expression, which only means, "good morning," that she failed to be conscious of its musical sound.

Lying over at the farthest end of the room, with one side of his bed alongside the wall, Nona had immediately discovered one of the newcomers among the wounded, who must be in a worse condition than the rest.

For he was not sitting up and his back was turned so that he faced the wall. But she did not go to him until she had spoken to the other men.

However, at her "Buon giorno, Signor," he moved so that he could look at her. He turned listlessly, and yet not as if the movement caused him any especial pain.

For an instant Nona stared rather too closely for politeness.

Then she said so tactlessly that she was ashamed of herself at the same moment.

"Why, is it you, Mr. Navara? I didn't know you for a second. Still, although I am awfully sorry you have been hurt, I am glad you are here in Florence where my friends and I can help to care for you."

"Oh, I am—not so—very—badly off; I shall soon cease—to give—a great—deal of trouble, but it—is pleasant—to find—you her," the young Italian answered slowly.

Nona noticed that his voice was hoarse and that he spoke with painful difficulty.

"I am glad of that," Nona returned cheerfully. "I shall tell Madame Valesky; I know she will be interested. She is living

in a villa near Florence and, perhaps you would allow her to come to see you."

But Carlo shook his head.

"It will—not be—worth while. You see, I cannot—talk to—any one—except—for a little time. It is—my voice,—you—understand, that is gone!"

At this the boy—he was not much more than a boy, pulled open his shirt, which had been fastened close about his throat. Then Nona saw, zigzagging across his neck and chest, a long white scar.

Moreover, Carlo looked at her with his brown eyes wide open and staring, but without a tremor of his eyelids or a quiver of his boyish mouth.

Yet Nona did not answer him. For suddenly she felt that she could endure the sorrow which this terrible war had brought and was hourly bringing into the world not a moment longer.

She had seen worse things in these past two years, perhaps heard sadder stories than Carlo's. But today it may be her nerves were worn out or she was more tired than usual.

For she now found herself fighting the impulse to cry out in rebellion against the news which this poor boy had just confided to her. Why should his hurt come in the one place that would make all his future desolate for him?

Nona knew she murmured something about hoping he might be mistaken and that surely something could be done for him later. Then she knew that she turned quickly away and almost ran out of the ward into the comparative seclusion of the hall.

Once out there, she allowed the rebellious tears to run unchecked down her face. Yet remembering where she was, she clenched her hands together, so that she would make no outward sound.

It was thus Dr. Latham found her.

"What is the matter, Miss Davis?" he demanded more brusquely than he often spoke to Nona. "If you are having an attack of nerves you had best go to your room. I have been telling you recently that you were overworking and must rest. We have too much on our hands here to have our nurses break down."

Which speech made Nona just sufficiently angry to brace her up, and this was probably what Dr. Latham intended.

However, she told him what she had just heard.

"It seems so terrible to me that the boy must keep on living, Dr. Latham, with his wonderful gift gone. He once told me that his mother and father kept a little Italian fruit shop in New York. I suppose that is all Carlo has left to look forward to now—tending the little shop—instead of fame and wealth and happiness."

"There are many of us who must give up our dreams, Miss Nona," the big doctor answered grimly, but Nona did not feel that he was unsympathetic.

"I'll see the young fellow," he added the next instant. "I am sorry I was a bit hard on him all for nothing but an attack of nerves. Certainly he has given his best to his country. But the main thing just now, Miss Nona, is that you must have a rest. A few weeks ago we would not have had you breaking down over one boy's story, no matter how tragic! Better get

your belongings together. I am going to see about your being allowed a holiday and telephone out to your friend, Madame Valesky, to expect you."

"But I am not willing to leave. I have just told Carlo Navara I wanted to help take care of him. Perhaps I could be just a tiny bit of help to him right now," Nona protested.

Dr. Latham frowned.

"Wait until I have seen the young fellow. Perhaps we may be able to arrange for his comfort as well. If he can be moved, don't you think your friend would take him in?"

But Nona could only shake her head in a kind of faint-hearted protest at the doctor's unexpected program. It really did sound too agreeable for her to feel sure that it would not mean unfaithfulness to her duty.

However, forty-eight hours afterwards, Nona found herself comfortably settled at Sonya's lovely villa and occupying the bedroom adjoining her friend's. Such details as securing her holiday from her work at the hospital—even to the informing of

Sonya when to expect her—had been carried out by the doctor.

Moreover, he also appeared to have influenced Sonya to consent that the young Italian musician be sent out to the Villa Felice as soon as he was able to be moved from the hospital.

As a matter of fact, Sonya had not the heart to refuse this second request. She was too deeply distressed by hearing of the boy's tragedy not to wish to do whatever was in her power to help. That in so short a time Carlo should accidentally have made so many appeals upon her, made him seem in a way her responsibility. But it would be little that an outsider could do to make him happier.

To Carlo Navara the loss of his exquisite voice and all that it would have meant toward securing a great future, was a misfortune too great for any stranger to offer consolation.

However, Sonya realized that, as she was to have Nona with her at the same time, the two of them together could surely make life a little pleasanter for Carlo than if he were left at the hospital.

But she was glad to have Nona to herself for a few days, before admitting any one else into her oddly complicated household.

CHAPTER IX

An Odd Household

ONE morning about a week later, a little before noon, Nona, seeing the door of the drawing-room at the villa partly open, slipped quietly in.

She was warm and a little exhausted and this room, with its dark old walls, its faded colors and soft lights, was always restful both to one's nerves and body.

Nona felt much better since her visit to Sonya, but not yet so well as she ordinarily did. Perhaps she had been more worn out than she or any one else, except Dr. Latham, had suspected; or perhaps her stay with Sonya had been slightly disappointing.

For one thing, three days after her own arrival, Carlo Navara had also appeared at the villa. He was not supposed to have been sent out so soon and was hardly well enough to leave the hospital, but Dr. Latham had telephoned that the boy's de-

pression had gotten on everybody's nerves —even at a hospital where one was supposed to become accustomed to other people's sorrows.

But, except to answer questions in monosyllables, Carlo had never spoken since Nona's conversation with him.

He had talked very little since his arrival at Sonya's. However, since talking was so difficult for him, neither Sonya nor Nona were anxious for him often to make the attempt until he grew stronger.

But otherwise he appeared entirely patient and grateful, and, whatever he may have been feeling, for the present made no complaints. He spent most of the time in his own room, lying quietly upon the bed with his face to the wall, as he had when Nona first discovered him. Only now and then, because Sonya insisted, he would permit himself to be wheeled out on the piazza of the villa and lie there in his chair with his eyes closed, or else staring with no expression of interest at the enchanting summer landscape.

Dr. Latham had insisted that he be kept

in the sunshine as much as possible, for he had been a number of weeks in a hospital nearer the frontier before being sent on to Florence.

For the past hour Nona had been in the kitchen of the villa trying to cook something to tempt Carlo's appetite. In helping to take care of him she felt that she was still going on in a small measure with her work, even while supposedly taking a holiday.

Of course Sonya did not wish her to do such tiresome work at such a time and when the heat was so great. But there seemed no one else. Sonya did not know how to do invalid's cooking, and Nona had taken the training as a part of her Red Cross work. And while Nannina—Sonya's housekeeper—was an excellent cook after the Italian fashion, the dishes she prepared were not what Nona considered the proper ones for an invalid.

So Nona was trying to make herself believe that it was the fact that she was continuing to keep busy, when she was not feeling well, that kept her half-way depressed and half-way cross.

Nona really knew the truth. It was not the presence of Carlo in Sonya's household who annoyed her, but Bianca's. For two days after her own arrival Nona had made up her mind that she did not like Bianca—nor did she like Sonya's interest, almost her affection, for the younger girl.

This morning, entering the sitting-room at the villa, and expecting to find it empty, Nona was immediately aggravated to behold Bianca already there.

She was seated in a high, carved chair, dressed in a delicate pink muslin and embroidering on a square of white linen.

She looked so cool and serene it was small wonder that Nona, who was hot and tired, became irritated.

Surveying Bianca she had a mental picture of herself, with a big apron over her cotton dress—for she was not wearing her nurse's uniform at the villa—her face flushed and perspiring and her hair flying.

Then she knew that Sonya was trying to induce Carlo to allow her and the young Italian peasant boy, who came to help him dress and undress, to take him outdoors.

Fortunately there was a small sitting-room on the ground floor which Sonya had adopted as a bed-room for her invalid guest.

Finally Nona recalled the vision of Nannina—Bianca's mother—when she had last seen her in her kitchen a few moments before. Nannina had been scrubbing and was in the state to which this occupation ordinarily reduces one. Moreover, she was preparing luncheon at the same time; which meant that she kept getting up from her knees on the back porch and coming into the kitchen to hang over the stove for a moment and then go back to her task.

No wonder Nona felt the contrast so keenly.

She had never before spoken to Bianca in the least disagreeable fashion, although she had several times felt inclined to do so.

Now she said rather sharply:

"Well, Bianca, it seems to me that you might find something more useful to amuse you—at least during the morning—than embroidering, considering how busy the rest of us must be."

In reply Bianca merely glanced calmly

up with that quiet, detached air, which Nona was finding constantly more aggravating.

"I don't know what I could do that is more useful. Eugino is needing new linen. His has worn out while at camp. I have always marked his things ever since I was a little girl. Besides, I have told you that my mother will not allow me to assist in the rough work. And your friend, Madame Sonya, understands this and has agreed that I go on living here as I have done in the past, otherwise my mother would not remain with her."

Bianca spoke very gently and politely, but somehow this did not make Nona feel any differently. Moreover, what Bianca said was entirely true. And this was one of Nona's secret grievances.

Some days before, Sonya had told her about the same thing. However, after being in the house twenty-four hours, no one need be told.

Bianca occupied the same pretty bedroom across the hall from Sonya's, which had been hers in the days of the Donna

Elizabetta, ate her meals at the table with Sonya, waited upon by her own mother, and accepting the situation as though it were a matter of course.

Somehow the whole situation jarred upon Nona. It was not that she felt herself superior in any possible way to Bianca. This was not the question. What Nona resented most was Bianca's cool acceptance of her mother's self-denial and unreasonable devotion.

Nona spoke of this fact to Sonya, and Sonya agreed with her.

"But, dear," she explained, "we have to excuse Bianca a little because she has never known anything else. It seems that her mother has insisted that she occupy a different position from herself ever since the child's babyhood, and the family here at the villa must have agreed. The fact is that Bianca really is so different it is hard to believe Nannina is her own mother. But I'm sorry you do not like the child's living here so intimately with us. I didn't know, Nona, that you were ever to be with me, when I allowed it, and Bianca is really

very sweet and helpful to me in a good many ways."

But, because all of this speech of Sonya's was so true, this did not make it the more agreeable to Nona.

She had noticed almost at once just how useful Bianca made herself to Sonya in the gentle, most subtle, fashion.

She always appeared to know what book Sonya wished to read; what chair she might like to occupy, and where it should be placed. She brought the older woman flowers and arranged them in a lovely fashion in every room in the villa. Besides, she was as fragrant and as ornamental as a flower herself, and was never out of temper, or impatient. Moreover, Bianca seemed, without obtruding the fact, grateful to Sonya and deeply admiring of her.

By contrast Nona could not but appreciate her own deficiencies in her relation to her friend.

There were so many things Bianca did for Sonya which she had never thought to do in the past year they had lived together. Moreover, she and Sonya had more than

once had differences of opinion and Nona had made no effort to hide her point of view. She was devoted to Sonya, of course, and expected her to understand it; but, after all, Sonya owed her no possible obligation, except that their mothers had once been friends. If she wished to care for Bianca as much—or more than she cared for her—she had every right.

It was true that Nona had done all she could for Sonya in those tragic days in Russia, when Sonya's liberty and life were both in danger. But no one wishes to secure affection through the remembrance of past favors.

There was another point concerning Bianca in which Nona and Sonya also failed to agree. This struck Nona as serious, but evidently Sonya felt there must be a possible simple explanation.

Soon after her arrival at the villa, Nona had apologized to her friend for having gone alone with Eugino Zoli to look at his studio.

But Sonya had appeared surprised. When Nona spoke of Bianca's having come

with the message that she return to the villa immediately, Sonya shook her head.

"Dear, you must have misunderstood in some way what Bianca said to you. How could I have had any way of knowing where you were since I had not stirred from the lawn and none of the others came back before you did? However, I am just as glad you did misunderstand Bianca, for I do not like your having been in the studio alone. Italy is not the United States and, even there, you should have had a chaperon."

As Nona did not wish to argue this question, she said nothing more. Nevertheless she was not at all convinced that she had misunderstood Bianca's message. As a matter of fact, she was sure she had not. But what reason could Bianca have for wishing her to come back to the villa? And how did she know where to look for her, when she had remained on the lawn with Sonya and Dr. Latham and the Princess?

The circumstance was something of a mystery to Nona, but she had made up

her mind that Bianca might prove a mystery in more ways than one. Just because she looked so gentle, and suggested such entire simplicity, all the more difficult she might be to fathom.

"You seem very fond of Signor Eugino," Nona remarked at this moment.

She was annoyed at this, too, because she had no idea of making this speech to Bianca at this moment.

The younger girl looked up.

"Of course I am. I am more fond of him than of any one in the world, now the Donna Elizabetta is gone."

"More than of your own mother?" Nona expostulated.

And this time Bianca did flush slightly.

"Oh, the case is different. It has been my mother's choice that I should have as little as possible to do with her. I do not understand the reason any better than you do. But it has been like this ever since I could remember."

Nona had dropped down in a chair and was idly turning over the pages of an Italian newspaper.

"I don't suppose it has been so very difficult for you, has it, Bianca? But it must be a pleasure to you that your foster brother is having so long a leave. If he comes this afternoon, suppose you see him alone. You may tell him that I am too tired for a walk. It is not necessary, I presume, for me to act as your chaperon. It is only best that you should be mine."

"I have not meant to annoy you," Bianca answered slowly, her face now almost concealed by being bent toward her sewing.

"Oh, you have not annoyed me," Nona returned carelessly; "only I have not been able to help noticing that you preferred being with Signor Zoli more than with Paulo. I suppose that is why you came to seek for us that afternoon at the studio."

But before Bianca could reply, Nona became conscious that Sonya was standing in the doorway and frowning upon her.

"I am surprised at you, Nona," she said slowly. "I could not help overhearing your last speech. Please don't quarrel. Then she turned to the other girl. "I

wonder, Bianca, if you would mind going out and reading to Carlo for a little while. Your Italian must be a pleasure to him after Nona's and mine, which is so impossible."

Then, when Bianca had gone quietly away, Sonya lingered as if she expected Nona to say something in answer to her reproach.

However, Nona pretended not even to see her.

A little later, going on up-stairs to her room, Nona made up her mind that she would not remain long at the Villa Felice unless a number of things were altered.

CHAPTER X

A Conversation

BIANCA went down the stone pathway and out on to the road which ran along in front of the villa.

She was wearing the same pale pink frock and a large hat encircled with a wreath of pink flowers. She also had on gloves and carried a white parasol.

Perhaps to most American girls Bianca's care of her personal appearance would have seemed an absurd vanity. But the little Italian girl had been brought up in this fashion. She had been taught that, to keep her delicate skin from the hot sun and wind, to wear pretty clothes and to preserve her little air of daintiness and aristocracy, was her chief business in life. For, while her peasant mother asked none of the natural things of her which most mothers might reasonably expect of a daughter, she had been very insistent that

the particular rules, which she had determined upon, be obeyed.

And Bianca was secretly a little afraid of the dark, gaunt woman, who had never taken her into her confidence in any way, and seemed so much less like her own mother than the Donna Elizabetta who had been only her friend.

Bianca commenced walking in the direction which she expected her foster brother, Eugino, to take. For the road she had chosen lay between the Villa Felice and the home of the Princess Carnia, where he and Paulo had been guests.

As Paulo's leave was over he had returned to the Italian army on the upper Isonzo. But Eugino had not sufficiently recovered from his injury to resume his aerial work and was staying on from day to day, hoping to be told by his physician that he might return to the Italian front. He had been injured internally by a fall, so that his recovery must of necessity be slow. But there was nothing to prevent his going about his ordinary affairs.

Therefore Eugino had been in the habit

of walking to his studio, not far from his own old home, and working there each afternoon for as many hours as he felt in the mood.

Occasionally he would stop along the way and have tea with Sonya and Bianca, for tea is almost as established a custom in Italy as in England.

However, Bianca had observed that, since Nona's arrival at the Villa Felice about a week before, Eugino had come to the villa every day for some reason or other. Bianca was sure of this because, as Nona had said, she had been careful to remain with Eugino during each visit.

She noticed him now at some distance away, walking slowly.

Eugino would be surprised on seeing her, as she was not allowed to leave the grounds of the villa, unless an older person were with her.

Eugino seemed to be thinking deeply. He looked very old and impressive to Bianca. He had always seemed so, but more especially in the last year since the Donna Elizabetta's death, and since he had

developed the small foreign beard and been away at the war front for a year.

As a matter of fact, Eugino was one of the few persons for whom Bianca had any deep feeling.

"Why this honor, Bianca?" he now asked, with his usual careless good nature, when he at last caught sight of her.

"I was going up to the villa, in any case, to ask Miss Davis if she would walk down to the studio with me and stay until tea time."

"Miss Davis told me to tell you, if you should ask for her, that she would be busy this afternoon. Besides, Eugino, I don't think Madame Sonya would like her to be in the studio alone with you," Bianca answered, in her gentle but self-possessed fashion.

"What reason have you for thinking that, Bianca? If it were true, Miss Davis is quite capable of telling me herself. Besides, you could be with us, if Madame Sonya prefers. It seems to me that you are with us most of the time anyway," the young man said, as if the fact had just occurred to him.

He began walking a little more rapidly, but Bianca kept beside him.

"Suppose we go straight to the studio then, Eugino, as Miss Davis does not wish to see you," Bianca went on with the determination of most quiet people. Indeed, this was her real purpose in coming out to meet her foster brother. She wished a talk alone with him.

"I can pose for you, if you like. You used to like me to pose for you very often."

"I like it now, Bianca," Eugino replied, glancing at the little girl, with a kind of critical, brotherly affection. "You know you are an extraordinarily pretty child, Bianca."

Bianca flushed slowly. Her face rarely betrayed much expression, but she did not look so pleased as one might expect at this.

"I am not a child, Eugino; I wish very much that you and everybody else would stop thinking of me as one. I am nearly sixteen, and because I happen to be small does not make me young. I suppose I shall never be very large.

"A Princess in Miniature, Bianca?"

"No, I am not a Princess, Gino; I wish I were, because, then, if I were only rich enough, you might marry me."

Eugino Zoli stopped and turned around.

"What an amazing thing for you to say to me, Bianca! If you were not a child it would be perfectly inexcusable. Of course you do not know what you are talking about, but, nevertheless, never say a thing like that again."

The young man spoke as severely as he knew how, but was really too surprised to be as forcible as he felt Bianca's extraordinary remark justified.

Nevertheless she went on with perfect serenity.

"I don't know why you should be so surprised, or so amazed, Gino. The Donna Elizabetta used to tell me that she hoped either you or Paulo would marry me some day, if only one of you could get hold of a fortune. She said it might be very hard for me to marry well with Nannina for a mother and knowing nothing of my own history. But she thought that you and Paulo would not care, as you both knew how much she loved me."

"Well, she certainly did that, Bianca," Eugino agreed, "more, I have sometimes thought, than she did either Paulo or me. But that was because she always wanted a daughter. I presume that is why she wished to hold on to you," he ended more leniently, as if he really were talking with a child. For to Eugino there seemed no other explanation, except that Bianca had not realized what she had said.

She walked on now for a short time without speaking, appearing just as delicate and flower-like and untroubled as before.

Eugino had a moment of feeling a trifle sorry for Bianca. Her position was difficult and he and Paulo had been pretty careless concerning her since his mother's death. But, somehow, the war made one forget one's smaller duties. Moreover, he had never been in sympathy with this whole business concerning Bianca. Yet, after all, she was as delicately pretty as a Dresden picture. One could scarcely imagine the child in anything except refined surroundings.

Then Eugino began thinking of another

person who interested him more than his foster sister.

However, Bianca appeared determined not to be ignored today.

Ordinarily she was quiet and unobtrusive, but evidently something had aroused her to unexpected expression.

"Gino, if you know anything about me, I think you ought to tell me about myself. It isn't fair. No one supposes I have any brains, or ever think about anything, when I really think a great deal. So much of the time there seems nothing else for me to do. Nannina talks about getting a lot of money for me some day, when everything will be just as I wish it. But I can't imagine where she expects to get money, doing the kind of work she does. Then I shall not always meet people so kind as the Signora Sonya. She is very wonderful and kind, but other people don't understand and don't like me, because of the way I treat Nannina and—and for other reasons."

Bianca hesitated an instant just as she concluded her speech.

She and her foster brother had left the

road which led up to the villa and were going along an enclosed path which was more direct to the studio.

Certainly Bianca had delivered Nona's message faithfully, so that the young man had given up the idea of trying to see her for this afternoon at least.

"Oh, you think entirely too much about yourself, Bianca. Most of us do, for that matter. But these things which worry you—you had better talk over with your mother. She is the proper person to decide what should be done about you. But I'll try to have a talk with her myself before I go back to the front," Eugino replied.

As a matter of fact, Eugino Zoli felt a little conscience smitten as well as sorry for Bianca. It was true his mother always had seemed exceptionally fond of her, and had not only expected, but requested, that he and Paulo do all that was possible for her. But Eugino had no idea of anything he might be able to do. If he had money that would of course be another matter. But he and Paulo were both ridiculously poor. And there was really no way for him to

acquire money except in the fashion Bianca had suggested. This question of marrying money did not strike the young Italian artist as it would most Americans. Foreign marriages, which were an exchange of money for something else supposed to be of equal value, were far too common.

Moreover, Eugino had no illusion about his profession. He knew that comparatively few artists ever make a comfortable living, and that only now and then one of them makes a fortune—and that usually after he is dead. Most of the money in art these days goes to the repurchasing of pictures by old masters—not to the buying of masterpieces by the young artists.

But because Eugino had been disappointed at not seeing Nona, and because Bianca had herself made the suggestion and he did not wish to show a lack of gratitude, he decided to try a sketch of her.

It was a hot midsummer afternoon, so they remained outdoors, but not far from the studio.

Bianca sat listlessly in a tall chair against a background of wild grape vines, her para-

sol open, upon which the vines made floating, soft green shadows.

Her face under its big white hat was also partly in shadow, but one saw the tiny point of her delicate chin, her fair hands clasped loosely in her lap, and her slender ankles and small feet. She also wore that same little serious, far-away expression which so often made people misunderstand her.

For truly Bianca was by no means so unconscious of the world and the circumstances surrounding her as she was supposed to be.

As he painted her, Eugino continued to become more and more impressed by Bianca's delicate prettiness. It was odd, but in some way she was more grown up than he had appreciated. It was probably because he had grown so accustomed to her that he had not noticed the change.

Now and then he and Bianca talked a little while he worked.

"I wonder why Miss Davis did not wish to see me this afternoon?" Eugino asked. "Had she any especial engagement?"

"I think she intended to try to amuse the young fellow who is staying with Madame Sonya, but I am not sure," Bianca returned. And then, after another moment: "You like Miss Davis very much, don't you, Eugino? It is funny, but you like so many different girls. People think it is Paulo who cares, while you are always laughing and indifferent. Yet it was always about you the Donna Elizabetta used to worry."

Eugino laughed good-naturedly.

"It seems to me, Bianca, that you are thinking and talking too much about my affairs this afternoon. Suppose you stop before I am annoyed. For a young lady who has been brought up not to express her opinions before older persons, you have done pretty well today."

So Bianca ceased talking and sat in the demure silence which had always been required of her.

She was sitting like this and Eugino was hard at work, when suddenly they both heard some one striding toward them.

Bianca looked up and turned a little pale. It was her mother, Nannina.

It was strange that she should always have this little fear of her. Nannina had been harsh, but never cruel. But Bianca was one of the unaccountable persons one meets now and then, who is sometimes very timid and then unexpectedly brave.

"So this is where you are," she said angrily to Bianca. "I thought as much when I learned you had disappeared."

She took Bianca by the shoulder and but for Eugino might have been rough with her.

"Have I not told you that you are not to go away from the villa alone?"

Then she turned to Eugino.

"The Signora told me if I found you at the studio to ask you to come and have tea with them. She thinks perhaps you may help with the invalid. Why she should worry over one young man—a stranger—when there are so many who suffer?"

Nannina spoke with a queer indifference. But Eugino paid no attention, except to be pleased by Sonya's invitation.

He had been accustomed to the queer peasant woman all his life. He knew she was odd and fierce and had strange ideas,

and, moreover, that her behavior toward Bianca seemed to be beyond explanation. However, she had always been an excellent servant, and he had thought very little about her in any other connection.

"Don't be cross with Bianca, Nannina, although you are right; she must not go about alone. But see what a lovely picture I have made of her."

Eugino picked up his canvas and as Nannina looked at it an intense expression of pride and pleasure crossed her face.

The next moment the three of them were returning to the Villa Felice.

CHAPTER XI

The Same Afternoon

ON that same afternoon it is true that Nona did offer to spend the time after luncheon with Carlo and to try if possible to keep him amused, in order that Sonya might be free.

Sonya agreed and slipped away to her own room. Soon after Nona went out on the piazza and, sitting down near the young soldier, began reading him the New York newspapers, which she had received unexpectedly from Barbara Thornton that same morning.

For a while it appeared as if Carlo were listening and was interested.

One had to judge by the expression of his eyes, since he so rarely spoke.

But, after a quarter of an hour or more, whenever Nona glanced toward him, she could see that he was scarcely conscious of her presence and certainly not of her reading.

Yet Dr. Latham had insisted that the one thing necessary for his recovery was to rouse the invalid from his depression.

Of her own lack of success in this direction, Nona was painfully convinced.

She stopped for an instant to rest her voice and to wonder if there were not something else she could do that might prove more availing, when Carlo began speaking to her.

He spoke in such a low voice and so brokenly that Nona had to lean toward him to hear.

"You—are—tired. Something—troubles—you. Go—away—to—rest. Perhaps—I—shall—sleep, if—I—am—alone."

Afterwards he closed his eyes and, when Nona had watched him for a short time, she believed he really had fallen asleep. So, asking Nannina to look out on the piazza every now and then to see if things were all right, she decided to lie down for half an hour or so. She was a little ashamed of the mood she had been in all day and hoped being alone and resting might make a difference.

Somehow Carlo's patience and dignity under his great misfortune seemed a kind of unconscious reproach to one. It was not that one could feel he had accepted his affliction, but whatever he felt so far he had been unwilling to discuss it.

Passing Bianca's door and not knowing she had already gone out, Nona had a moment of thinking she would go in and be more friendly with her.

She had been extremely cross. Moreover, the fact that Bianca was kept from knowing anything of her own history should have made one sympathetic with her, not annoyed. Nona remembered how much the mystery concerning her own mother had troubled her girlhood, until her chance meeting with Sonya and Sonya's explanation to her later. Yet, of course, the circumstances were in no way the same. What she resented about Bianca was not the facts of her history, but the cool fashion in which she treated her own mother.

Moreover, Nona had the impression that Bianca was not truthful and that she would hesitate at nothing to accomplish her own

ends. She knew it would be impossible to make Sonya accept this same opinion—or any one else, for that matter—because Bianca looked so exquisitely young and gentle. Moreover, Nona had no real authority for her point of view, except a quickly developed personal prejudice.

She concluded, however, not to trouble Bianca now, but to try to be kinder and more agreeable to her later in the afternoon.

Nona heard Sonya moving about in the bedroom adjoining hers and called out to her that their patient wished to sleep.

"Rest, then, until tea time, Nona dear," Sonya called back. "I am going down to the drawing-room a little later and I'll see that Carlo is not neglected."

So Nona lay down, intending to take a nap.

But in the most absurd fashion she began wondering if Eugino Zoli were coming to make a call at the villa at any time during the afternoon, and also if Bianca would deliver her message.

If she really were not busy when he came, he might think her rude. It would

have been simpler merely to have left word with Nannina that she was resting and hoped to be excused.

To have referred to the fact that Bianca had never once left her alone with her foster brother, must have made her either seem absurd in the younger girl's eyes, or else jealous, which Nona knew was worse than absurd.

After all, why should she have wished to be alone with the young Italian soldier, who was still a comparative stranger to her, in spite of his evident interest and friendliness?

Nona felt that Bianca had rather the best of the present situation. Then she found herself flushing warmly at the idea that Bianca might mention to her foster brother what she had said. After all, had not the little girl the right? She had known him all her life and was so devoted to him.

But, somehow, Nona did not feel that Bianca's affection was just what one might feel for a big brother. Perhaps Nona had recognized something about the little girl which none of the other people about her

had seen. Bianca was growing up; instead of being younger than sixteen, as her appearance suggested, in some ways she was older. But this was natural, because Italian girls do grow old very soon. One remembers that Juliet was only fourteen, yet Juliet was rather uncomfortably precocious in her emotions.

Bianca was simply not so childish as people considered her, nor was she so unconscious of the strangeness and the possible unhappiness of her own position.

Not long after Nona spoke to her, Sonya went down to her drawing room.

Through the open window she could see Carlo lying back in his wheeled chair with his eyes closed; but she knew from a slight movement which he occasionally made that he was not asleep.

However, Sonya decided not to disturb him. First, she wrote several letters to old friends in Russia. It was so wonderful these days to be able to write freely, to have no fear of bringing trouble upon her friends by saying what she thought and felt. For Russia's old chains were broken!

Now, if only she remained true to her dream and forged no new fetters!

Then, when Sonya had finished writing, she sat down by the piano and began playing, at first softly, drifting from one air to the other, as if she were merely playing to herself.

But all the while she was conscious of the mute figure of the boy outside her window—his listlessness and his lack of interest in the return to a life, which had already robbed him of the only thing for which he greatly cared.

Sonya was a gifted musician and knew a great deal of beautiful Russian music, music with the passion and the vision of the old Russia, struggling out of darkness and oppression into the wonderful new light of freedom. Small wonder, then, that Russian music haunts one as no other!

Several times Sonya noticed that Carlo opened his eyes, staring blindly at the exquisite summer landscape of evergreens and roses which makes the Italian country so lovely.

Then, when another ten minutes had

passed and she looked again, she saw that he had bent his head and covered his face with his hand.

For a little while longer Sonya played on and then went out to him.

She stood by his chair for a moment, but when he did not look up, laid her hand softly on his dark hair.

Carlo Navara belonged to the familiar type of the beautiful Italian peasant. He had the white skin, the large dark eyes, the straight short nose and the full deeply curved lips that one sees in Raphael's cherubs and in Andre del Sarto's beautiful children.

Sonya felt for the moment as if she stood in the place of the boy's mother, so strangely she seemed to have had to offer him encouragement of one kind or another in each of their meetings.

But, although she had not liked the boy while crossing the ocean with him, had thought him too vain, too assured that his musical gift must make him acceptable to everybody, she had since grown not only to like him, but to feel an odd respect for him.

The way Carlo had confessed to her his nervous fear of himself—the terror that he might not have it in him to make a gallant soldier—had been the first thing which had affected her attitude. It is a fine thing sometimes to have the courage to confess one's own weakness, when one also has the courage to overcome it.

And Carlo had given his all and lost so quickly.

As Sonya stood there beside him she thought of a few lines in a great poem by Rudyard Kipling, called "If."

"If we can make one heap of all our winnings,
And risk it on one game of pitch and toss
And lose and start again at the beginning
And never breathe a word about our loss."

At least, these were the lines as Sonya remembered them. Well, Carlo had risked and lost, now, could he ever bring himself to start again and still to make something out of life from whatever was left him? And could she in any way help him toward some new beginning?

Sonya felt almost as hopless as Nona

had previously, and yet she allowed Carlo to cry on, glad at last that his stoicism, which Nona had believed to be courage, had broken down.

She knew that he was too young and too emotional to go on forever in silence, never speaking of his misfortune, nor receiving the sympathy he so badly needed.

After all, it seemed to Sonya as if Carlo were young enough to be her son!

But, by and by he straightened up and took his hand down from his eyes.

"It was your music, dear lady, or I should not have been such an infant."

Carlo did not talk like an American boy. For one thing, he had begun calling Sonya "dear lady," which sounded very charming when coming from him, and yet might have been affected in some one else. But Carlo was an Italian and an artist. One could not expect him to be conventional, either in his emotions or in his expression of them.

"I know," Sonya answered, "and I hoped my music might have just the result it did have upon you. There are so many

worse things, Carlo, dear, than being an infant. Besides, why should you always hold on to yourself? Why should you not express your grief over your great loss? If you will only break down now and then, it will help you toward recovery."

"But I do not wish to recover," Carlo replied quietly. He did not speak in any dramatic heroic fashion, but as if he honestly meant what he said.

"It was so hard to explain to the good doctors and nurses at the hospital, who worked so hard to make me well," Carlo went on. "But I think I can make you see."

Then he told his story very much as Nona had pictured it to herself on first learning of Carlo's tragedy.

"I—have no—gifts, no brains—outside—my music. I can—make nothing—of my life—now that is gone. It will—be only—the little fruit shop for me—always, only—the company—of people—for whom—I shall—never care, having known others so different. Others, whom—I had hoped—some day—would care for me—because of the happiness I—could give them.'

Sonya nodded.

"I think I can understand—at least in a measure—Carlo. But no one who has not had a great gift like your's can wholly appreciate what the losing of it must mean. But there must be other things. You see, most people have to be happy without a great talent; sometimes without even a little one. Then there are the little father and mother at home, who need you."

But Sonya could not feel that what she was saying interested Carlo.

"I know," he answered, quiet and self-possessed once more, "but there are other —younger—children, and they—the little —mother—and father—must—lose their —wonderful pride in me. Somehow—it made them feel—happier and more content. You—do not know—how we Italians, even —the humblest—of us, like I and—my people, care for music. Besides—they—could—not be glad—seeing—me wretched."

"But, Carlo, are you so sure your voice may not come back to you again? Even in these few days you have spent here with me, it seems to both Nona and to me, that

when you try you can speak more distinctly. As you grow stronger, your voice must improve. I do not say there is hope; I do not know. But there is other music in the world besides one's voice. When you are well enough, if you wish, you and I can work here together. Then, when you go back to the United States, there will be doctors who may be able to do more for you. They are so busy here in Italy, you see; there are so many to be cared for."

Carlo shook his head; nevertheless his expression was more cheerful.

"At—other times—you have—given me courage, dear lady, but now—as you—cannot do that, you would wish to—give me hope."

But Carlo appeared more animated than he had at any time since his arrival at the villa, so Sonya continued talking on less personal subjects.

He spoke only occasionally in response, but each time Sonya believed that he spoke more easily, with less long pauses between his words. Now and then three or four words would come quickly and naturally.

However, Sonya feared that she had probably been wrong to offer the boy the hope that he might be able to sing again. However, how is one to live on without hope? And it might be possible that his gift for music would one day express itself in some other way.

Just before tea time it occurred to Sonya that Carlo might feel weary of so much feminine society.

She knew that Eugino Zoli was probably working in his studio. But she did not know that Bianca was with him.

Nona had not yet come down-stairs. However, Sonya asked Nannina to try and find the young artist and to persuade him to come to the villa for tea.

CHAPTER XII

A Lack of Caution

WHEN Nona Davis finally came down-stairs and out on to the piazza, to her surprise she saw Eugino Zoli sitting there talking to Carlo.

Apparently no one had heard her approach.

She stood for a moment in the doorway studying the little group of people.

Bianca and Sonya were a little apart from the two young men, and Bianca looked as fresh and fragrant in her pale pink dress as she had at the beginning of the warm summer afternoon.

Sonya was attired in a simple lilac muslin and had put a big white rose into her belt.

But Nona did not look at them long. Really she was more interested in watching Eugino Zoli.

Up-stairs in her own room, Nona had at last confessed to herself that she really

liked the Italian soldier and artist very much, when one considered how brief a time they had known each other. Also she believed he liked her. He had said nothing, but there had been in his voice and manner a something vaguely flattering and appealing. Perhaps Nona did not appreciate that there are men who have this charm in their manner toward all women, or if she did know, Eugino did not create this impression.

She now wondered again if Bianca had given him her message. Absurdly she felt the least little bit annoyed that Eugino had evidently been happy to remain at the villa without the prospect of seeing her.

But he was talking to Carlo in the kindest and most sympathetic fashion.

Certainly Eugino Zoli gave one the impression of being older than he really was. Everybody thought the same thing concerning him. Nona understood that he was only a few years older than she, and yet he had the poise of a man of wide experience. And Nona thought she had grown rather tired of boys. Her two years'

work in Europe in Red Cross nursing oftentimes made her feel as if her own girlhood were far behind. So much pain and so much fortitude, so much tragedy and yet through it all the quality of divine humor, such as Dante must have meant to suggest in his Divine Comedy, she had seen behind the great battle fronts.

"But you must feel very proud and happy to know you have given so much to Italy, Signor Navara," Eugino Zoli was saying, with deeper feeling than he generally expressed. "It is very splendid to me! You were brought up in the United States; Italy cannot have meant so much to you. With us who have always lived here in Italy, the case is very different. It is natural that we should wish to give our lives gladly to see our country great again; to see Italy return to the old splendor that was once hers, but with a newer, more democratic ideal than the Italy of the past."

Then, when Carlo made no reply, Nona walked out to join her friends. Immediately Eugino Zoli arose, bowing to Nona in his perfectly courteous fashion. He showed

not the least trace of resentment because of her having sent him word she did not wish to see him during the afternoon. Moreover, as he made no reference to this fact, Nona found herself vaguely apologizing. She could not apologize in any downright fashion, for she did not yet know whether Eugino had suggested any wish to see her on this particular afternoon.

"I think I have been feeling rather used up by the heat. Anyhow, I have been too cross to see any one until now. I am glad you are here, Signor Zoli," Nona said frankly, after she had shaken hands; flushing a little, but at the same time smiling half humorously and half with an appeal for forgiveness.

Eugino answered straightforwardly.

"I should like to have seen you earlier, Miss Davis. I wished you to spend the afternoon at the studio with me if it were possible and would not have bored you. But Bianca told me you expected to have something else to do."

Before Nona could reply, hearing an exclamation from Sonya, she glanced up

and saw Dr. Latham's large figure walking slowly up their path.

The American doctor had again come uninvited to the Villa Felice.

Nona had a flash of wondering if after all he did not dislike Sonya so much as he pretended. But, of course, he had the excuse of desiring to see Carlo Navara, who was still his patient, although no longer at the hospital.

As soon as the doctor had shaken hands with Sonya he turned directly to Carlo. As Nona chanced to be standing near, he simply smiled his greeting to her, and bowed rather brusquely to her companion.

"Well, Navara, you are looking in much better shape than when I saw you last, but pretty tired. Have your nurses been too devoted?"

Carlo shook his head and smiled. He and the doctor had become good friends and understood each other fairly well by this time.

"Suppose I bundle you off to your room and have a talk with you there."

But at this Carlo shook his head.

"If I—could stay—a little longer—until —after tea I would not—try to—talk," he answered.

Dr. Latham listened with his great head a little to one side.

"All right; only half an hour more. But you are talking much better, boy, than I dreamed you could in so short a time."

"You have done wonderful things for your patient, Dr. Latham," Eugino Zoli said with his usual courtesy.

But Dr. Latham shook his head almost angrily.

"I have done nothing at all. Navara was almost healed of his wound when he came to Florence. I mean the outside wound. I had to send him out here to the Villa Felice for the wound that went deeper. That is what we doctors have been doing ever since this war began—healing the wounds of the body when we could and sending our patients to women for the healing we cannot give."

The big doctor spoke with such earnestness and sweetness that Nona felt her eyes suddenly swimming in tears.

Sonya crossed over to him.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said. "But I wish some day men would learn not to kill one another. We women sometimes grow very weary trying to bind up the wounds that war has made. Try to make the suffering a little less. For all our efforts are so unavailing if men will go on fighting forever. Oh, I have tried to see—tried to be inspired by the great lessons this war has taught us—the great results it has already achieved. But I still cannot believe in war."

"No more can I, Madame," Dr. Latham returned grimly. "I wonder, too, how many of the men and women engaged in this business of trying to heal, do believe in it? Some day perhaps——"

But Eugino Zoli interrupted with a sudden change of voice and manner, so conspicuous that his companions looked at him in surprise.

"For my own part I hope that the making of war may never end. What else is there except that we fight for the things we hold dear? Death is inevitable. For my part I should prefer the soldier's death."

Again Dr. Latham shook his head.

"But we were not talking of death, young man. However, you Italians are all alike—gallant lovers and gallant soldiers."

Sonya had made a slight movement of her hand toward Carlo which had checked the seriousness of the American doctor's argument.

The boy was sitting up with his face white and strained. Their argument had touched him far too closely.

Moreover, Nannina came out on the piazza at this instant bearing the inevitable tea tray. Cakes were a forbidden luxury in Italy these days, but Sonya managed to supply her guests with tiny sandwiches and sweet crackers.

Eugino and Dr. Latham had sat down near each other and were evidently not prepared to give up their conversation.

"The great Italian drive will begin in a short time, Dr. Latham, not far from Trieste. All winter we have been preparing." Eugino went on, speaking with an earnestness and enthusiasm which made Nona

stare at him with mild amazement. He had always seemed to her a casual person, perhaps not very earnest about anything, except to make himself agreeable and to work at his art when he was in the proper mood.

But now his eyes had become steady, determined.

"They need me at the front, Dr. Latham. I mean they need all the fellows they can get just now to reconnoiter over the lines," he went on enthusiastically. "We have been watching the Austrian fellows pretty closely. You see, I don't think the people in the United States have ever altogether understood how seriously we Italians have prepared for our share in the war. There have been reasons why we have had to wait for our great offensive but in a short time—"

Sonya was pouring the tea, but she now turned around. Nannina was still standing behind her chair and seemed to be listening. It was but natural that she should be interested in what Eugino Zoli was saying.

"You can go now, Nannina," Sonya ordered gently. "There is no need to trouble you to help us any further."

But the next moment she added:

"I am sorry, but you seem to have forgotten the lemon. Would you mind getting it for us?"

It was most unusual, that Nannina should be forgetful. She must have been worried over something this afternoon, for she was forced to go back to her kitchen and return a third time before the tea service was finally complete.

However, no one minded waiting, especially as Eugino continued talking of the Italian war plans.

"I wish you would take a look at me, Dr. Latham, and see if you don't think I am fit to get back to work. My physician in Florence is an old friend of my mother's and a little more careful, I think, than he need be. It will be a great favor," he urged at length.

Dr. Latham nodded.

"Very well, if your doctor does not object. But I expect you are too impatient,

Zoli. I've been hearing rumors myself, and I've an idea it may be several weeks before the Italian drive begins. Do you not intend to wait until the British Monitors come to your aid?"

Nona stirred uncomfortably and exchanged a sympathetic glance with Carlo.

Evidently they both felt that Dr. Latham and Eugino were talking far too openly. There could be no danger in speaking freely here at Sonya's villa perhaps, but Nona had been through so many unexpected experiences since the war began that she believed no one with information of any value could be too cautious.

CHAPTER XIII

Dangerous Popularity

INSTEAD of living at her Italian villa in peace and loneliness as she had anticipated, as time passed on Sonya Valesky found her home becoming more and more a center of a group of interested and interesting acquaintances.

Sonya was a rarely charming woman, possessing a wonderful gift as a hostess—the ability to make other people talk without talking a great deal herself. Then, too, she was very beautiful and, as she had refused to tell anything of her past history to her Italian acquaintances, a gentle air of mystery surrounded her which is always alluring.

However, a great many of Sonya's new friends developed through the increasing intimacy of Eugino Zoli with the tenants occupying his own and his brother's home.

Eugino had seen Dr. Latham in regard

to returning immediately to the Italian front. But the American physician's verdict had been the same as his own Italian physician's. Eugino was not to be in too much of a hurry. Give himself time and he would be all right for service again. A soldier in the aviation service must be always at his best both in body and mind. Unlike other soldiers, he had only his own judgment and his own initiative to depend upon, while at his work.

As a matter of fact, Eugino Zoli was a captain of aviation for the Italian Government. Already on several occasions he had distinguished himself and been rapidly promoted, until now he was considered one of the most talented and daring men in the aerial squadron.

Therefore, the young man was naturally impatient over his long inaction. Had he been seriously invalided he might have regarded the matter differently. But to feel almost entirely well, to be able to go about his ordinary affairs, and yet not permitted to get back to the line was tremendously irksome.

For Nona Davis was right in her observation. However little in earnest Eugino Zoli might appear to be about many of the other circumstances of life, he was tremendously in earnest about his work as a soldier.

He proved this to himself in these passing weeks by his inability to feel the deep interest in his art which he had felt before Italy's entrance into the war. It was true, he went to his studio nearly every day for a time, attempting to get back into serious work. But, after a few hours, he was more than apt to give up and, whenever he felt it possible, stop by for a call at the Villa Felice.

Moreover, he did not always make his calls alone. A number of soldiers—friends of Eugino's—were also on leave of absence in Florence. And these friends Eugino got into the habit of taking to Sonya's to tea.

Many of their own Italian friends were extremely depressed by the war; most of them were actually too poor to be able to offer even the simple hospitality of tea, except on stated occasions. So it was

pleasant to find a home always open and agreeable, with a charming woman as hostess and more often than not several pretty girls willing—and even more than willing—to make themselves attractive.

So the guests introduced by Eugino were afterwards apt to return to Sonya's alone. And, although Sonya was secretly amused by the difference between her own plan for a quiet summer and the way fate had changed the arrangement for her, she acquiesced with entire good nature.

For one thing Nona was with her a good part of the time and the three other Red Cross girls, who had crossed with them, whenever they were free from their hospital work. And, of course, the American girls were naturally interested in the young Italian soldiers, whom they were not nursing just at present, although there was always the possibility that they might be at their mercy later on.

Then Bianca was always there. It was difficult to guess how much the young men guests interested her, as she was so quiet. But, then, Bianca always managed to be

most becomingly dressed and to make a charming picture of herself, either consciously or unconsciously.

It was true that the young soldiers usually talked upon subjects outside her knowledge. For most of their conversation was with regard to the war, as it was being fought all over Europe, but more especially at the Italian front, where the preparations for the long-expected assault were now almost completed.

So closely had the American Red Cross girls been in touch with the war through their nursing that they could not fail to be interested and also to have opinions of their own to express.

There were times when Sonya actually felt sorry for Bianca, so set apart did the little Italian girl seem from the other young people. This was not only because she was younger, but because she was evidently so ignorant of the entire war situation. Nannina had allowed her to do nothing to help the war cause except to sew. But Sonya observed that Bianca always managed to have her knitting, or some piece

of Red Cross sewing, in her hands when the young Italian soldiers were present.

However, Sonya's guests were by no means young men only. The Italian country people in the neighborhood called upon her and seemed to like her very much.

There was also the Princess Carnia, whom Eugino Zoli had introduced among his first friends. He had been a guest at her house for a time, but insisting he was imposing upon her kindness had afterwards gone to board with acquaintances living in the same neighborhood. As a matter of fact, when Eugino was not at Sonya's at tea time, he was usually with the Princess. She was an American girl, as he had once explained to Nona, and an old friend.

They also came to Sonya's together occasionally. Yet it was just possible that the Princess was a little annoyed by Sonya's popularity. She was very young and fond of society and her home had no rival until Sonya rented the villa. Moreover, the Princess had no other American girl, except herself, to offer as an attraction, while Sonya might have any number from one to four.

Nona Davis, however, was not present at all the informal tea parties. For, as soon as she had rested and grown a little stronger, she began going back to Florence to work at the hospital during the day and, as a special favor, was allowed to return to Sonya at night.

Sometimes it so happened that she was able to get back to the Villa Felice before all the guests had departed, if the work at the hospital chanced to be a little lighter than usual.

But one evening she drove back from Florence to Sonya's home nearly an hour later than was customary with her. She had been detained to assist at a difficult operation.

It was already dusk as she passed by the now familiar landscape.

Looking back, Florence was a gray city of classic shadows, while closer by the countryside was dim and sweet.

Nona lay back in her ancient carriage, relaxing as completely as possible. It was the only way in which one could do the strenuous work which nursing required, by

learning to give up completely when the actual strain was removed.

But Nona was congratulating herself that Sonya's everlasting group of Italian admirers must have departed that afternoon before her own return. For, neither physically nor mentally, did she feel in the humor for being even civil to strange visitors. She wanted nothing so much as a bath and a bed and a book, and Sonya to come up after dinner to talk to her and to tell her what had happened at the villa during the day—whether Eugino had been there and if he had left a message for her.

It was with relief that Nona discovered the piazza at the villa was for once empty.

But as she went up the steps she could hear the sound of the piano from the drawing room.

Nona knew that Sonya often played to Carlo at this hour. In the morning they studied music together, but Carlo would never play if he supposed any one near. He knew something of the piano, of course, having learned to accompany his own songs, but in only a halting fashion. Be-

fore he had devoted all his energy and his passion to his singing.

But it was lovely to hear Sonya, and Nona felt just what she was in the mood for at this time. So she slipped quietly into the half-darkened room, hoping that no one would be disturbed by her entrance.

Sonya did not stop playing, nor turn around. She had on a soft old white muslin which fitted her figure with the peculiar elegance which was so characteristic of her, and which the Red Cross girls had at once noticed in their first meeting more than two years before.

Sonya was playing from memory. Her head with its closely coiled hair—now iron gray, with the odd streak of pure white across the front—was thrown a little back, since in this way she was less conscious of her audience.

Carlo Navara, who was in his wheeled chair, had been placed in such a position that he could look directly at Sonya.

Bianca was not far away, but sitting beside some one whom Nona was surprised to see.

But at once Eugino Zoli got up and directed Nona to a place on the sofa where he had been seated.

"I am going to be here to dinner and I wanted particularly to see you. You will see me for a little while alone?"

Nona nodded agreement.

Then, after Sonya had finished playing, she went up-stairs and dressed for dinner, forgetting how tired she had been a short time before.

CHAPTER XIV

Uncertainty

"BUT, my dear Signora, even the severest American chaperon would agree to this."

Sonya looked at her guest steadfastly for an instant and then smiled.

"But I have told you many times that I am not an American, Eugino, even if Nona is, and you will confuse facts. Besides, you know you are not an American, even if your mother was and you like now and then to pose as one. In many ways you are the most Italian of persons, and I am by no means sure I trust you," Sonya answered with a half humorous, half serious inflection in the tones of her voice.

She and Eugino Zoli were very good friends to the point of Sonya's calling the young man by his first name. Moreover, she understood the young Italian even better than he enjoyed her doing.

"That is an insult to my country and to me, Signora, and only your sex protects you after such a speech. But if you'll do as I ask, why—" Eugino smiled.

"Oh, Nona may go with you if you'll promise not to walk far away from the villa and not to stay out too late." Sonya conceded. "Also, I assure you, Signor Eugino, that it is only in matters of the heart where I fear your countrymen are not always to be trusted. So remember, Nona dear, that it is moonlight in Italy and Eugino is a gallant soldier—"

Sonya laughed, and Nona paid no particular attention to what she was saying. Indeed, she thought that Sonya's and Eugino's somewhat stilted conversation was the least bit silly and that Sonya's was not altogether in good taste.

Moreover, she was anxious to be out of doors.

Dinner had been over half an hour at the Villa Felice and coffee served some time before in the drawing-room.

Carlo Navara had gone to his own apartment; although much better, he was still an invalid.

Nona wished that Bianca would occasionally disappear as well. But Bianca was omnipresent, never apparently thinking it her place to retire until Sonya's guests and Sonya herself had withdrawn.

However, tonight the girl might serve as a companion for Sonya, if she were lonely, which was not probable. For even Bianca could not arrange to accompany her foster brother on the present occasion.

Nevertheless, Nona was a little irritated by believing she noticed a demure smile upon Bianca's face at Sonya's last words. However, Nona realized that she was always a little bit suspicious of the younger girl and perhaps not always fair.

Nona also put on a white muslin dress for dinner and wore over her shoulders an ivory crepe shawl which belonged to Sonya.

Finally she and Eugino went out together.

The moon had passed the fullness, but was still wonderfully brilliant with a late summer radiance. The air was no longer filled with the scent of roses, although in Italy roses bloom all the year. But tonight

there was a stronger fragrance—the odor of ripening grapes. For much of the hill country about Florence is a vineyard country and Sonya's villa was set in the midst of it.

Nona and Eugino first walked through the little garden with its orange and lemon trees, and then Eugino found a path which at length brought them to a little marble bench, not far from what had once been a fountain, but was now overgrown with vines.

"This is part of our estate too, so we are keeping our word," Eugino said, as he spread out his handkerchief on the stone seat. "We have a good deal of land about here, but were not able to take proper care of it, so it has gone to waste. I believe that is the present tragedy of all Italy, so much we have that is beautiful and worth while and so little money to turn it to account."

Nona and her companion were both seated as Eugino said this.

Nona hesitated a moment and then answered quietly:

"I think I like things best as they are. You see, in the past two years I have traveled so much, having nursed in most of the Allied countries since the war began. So when other people told me I should be overwhelmed by 'the spell of Italy' I don't think I quite believed them. However, I have been, and I suppose no one can escape its glamour. Why, tonight this place about us seems like some wonderful dream country. You see, I like this ruined part of your garden better than the places which have been carefully tended. I admire that old fountain there with the vines half hiding it and that charming little boy's figure with his arms full of real green things, far better than I could ever like a well-kept fountain—say one of the ugly kind we have in so many of our American parks. You see, you don't know, Signor Eugino, how inartistic we Americans can sometimes manage to be in our country," Nona ended.

Eugino shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can think of nothing about your country which is not flattering," he

returned. "Perhaps, because of my mother I have always had a deep interest in the United States. But since your entrance into this war for the sake of an ideal, with nothing to gain and so much to suffer, why I don't mind being considered an enthusiast. Many other Italians also feel as I do and are anxious to have you understand us. I think we are even a little jealous, because France and England and now the new Russia seem in closer touch with you than Italy. I wonder if you know Italy controls more enemy territory in Europe than all the Entente Allies combined. She is holding a longer battle front than the French, British and Belgian fronts. Her long trench line is blasted from solid rock and her guns have to be carried from mountain peak to mountain peak. But forgive me for riding my hobby like this. I'm sorry. I didn't come out to talk to you about Italy tonight. I believe I came to talk about you and perhaps about myself." The tone of the young man's voice altered.

"I hope I haven't bored you too much. Truly I did not spend so much time per-

suading the Signora to let us have this hour together to make a patriotic speech. You will forgive me?"

Nona smiled her forgiveness.

How utterly unlike any one she had ever known was her companion! Yet, somehow, his curious mixture of careless good nature with his ardent patriotism attracted her very much? Or was she not attracted by Eugino himself? Is it not rather like a girl to think she likes or dislikes certain traits in a man's character, when it is the man himself she either likes or dislikes?

"You see, I am going back to the front in a day or so and I wanted to say farewell. I have seen my physician today and he at last has given his consent. It may be tomorrow that I shall go. So I may not see you again until I come back, if I ever return," Eugino went on. "One does not know——" He spoke with a soldier's careless fatalism.

But Nona felt a queer little stiffening in her throat—the feeling that *she* cared whether Eugino returned more than she had any possible right to do.

She looked very fair and sweet with her head a little bowed and her pale yellow hair bound in close braids shining in the silver light with a kind of pale glow.

Now she pulled Sonya's shawl a little closer about her.

"I am sorry to have to say good-bye to you. Only for your sake, as I know how much you have wished to go, I must not be sorry." Nona answered, needing a little effort to keep her voice steady.

"No more sorry than that?" Eugino returned in the voice and manner which Nona had never been able to understand. Was he in earnest, or was he only pretending to care for her that he might leave with her a more charming impression?

"You see, it has meant a great deal to me to have known you, and to have you living in my mother's home, more than perhaps you dream, or than I have any right to tell you now. But you will be my friend and when I return——"

Eugino's hand touched Nona's lightly and gently, but before she could answer, looking up she saw two figures approaching

them. In a moment she discovered they were Sonya's and Bianca's.

The young Italian girl was leading the way down the same path which Eugino had taken through the garden.

"I am sorry, Eugino," Sonya began half apologetically, "but it is growing later than you and Nona can realize. And you know Nona was tired when she came in and must be back at the hospital early in the morning. But why have I never seen this beautiful part of the garden until tonight? Bianca, you might have showed it to me before."

Then, as Eugino and Nona had both risen, Sonya put her arm about Nona's shoulder, in a kind of protecting fashion.

Then Sonya, with Nona of necessity beside her, started back toward the villa, leaving Eugino and Bianca to follow.

The young man would not come in again. He preferred saying good-night out on the piazza.

And Nona was always to remember him as he said good-bye—not to her—but to Sonya.

Lifting Sonya's hand he bent his head and kissed it and then said:

"To Italy and her Allies and to Peace!"

Then the next moment he had gone.

Yet Nona imagined, perhaps foolishly, that Eugino's final farewell had been the look he gave her, just as he turned to go away.

The following day he returned to the Italian front.

CHAPTER XV

Whispers in the Air

BUT within a short time Nona Davis also returned to her regular work at the hospital in Florence.

Having entirely recovered her usual strength and nerve, she felt that she no longer deserved even a half holiday.

But, in order to make up for the time she had lost, Nona now went very seldom to the Villa Felice, hearing from Sonya more often by letter, but scarcely ever seeing her.

Nevertheless, Nona managed now and then to find opportunity to think of Eugino Zoli. She was a little annoyed to find how frequently she did think of him in the pauses from the more strenuous moments of her nursing, and during moments before she dropped wearily to sleep at night.

Twice she received notes from him, but with nothing in them of importance. The young officer merely wrote that he hoped

Nona was well and not wearing herself out with too much work. He also said that preparations were going on even more brilliantly and that the late summer drive would be an even greater success than the spring attack near the Gulf of Trieste. Of himself Eugino made no mention except to say he was busy and hopeful of many things.

However, whether he intended it or not, there was even a tantalizing quality within Eugino's short letters. Nor could one tell whether he were speaking of his beloved country, or of more personal desires in his "hoping for many things?"

Once Sonya also received a letter from him and afterwards wrote Nona of it.

"The charming Eugino has written me —he of the beautiful manners and the susceptible Italian heart. I believe I have more faith in him as a soldier than as a suitor, and have an idea, Nona mine, that we will hear great things of Eugino Zoli before the war is over.

"Nevertheless Bianca and I miss him very much and talk of him daily. I have

sometimes thought the little Italian girl cares more for her foster brother than either of them can know. And I believe it best if they never make the discovery. Bianca is with me constantly these days and I should be lonely without her. For, although Nannina is the most faithful of servants with regard to her work, she has strange habits of disappearing, usually at night, and remaining away, until I really don't know when she comes in, as I must be asleep when she finally returns.

"However, Nona, I have no lack of visitors. Eugino's friends are faithful, if Eugino has gone. My tea parties continue almost every afternoon without my volition. The Signors appear and tea must follow. Yet we do nothing but talk war, war, war! It seems to me the Italians are franker than most soldiers, although they had once the reputation for being a secretive nation. But I think I could almost write out the plan of the approaching campaign, unless my guests are talking of matters that they do not really understand.

"All love and hoping each day to see you,
"SONYA."

What was there of so particularly disturbing a character in Sonya's letter?

Yet, somehow, nearly every line of it vaguely worried Nona.

First she wondered if there could be a deeper friendship between Eugino and Bianca than she had appreciated? She had always believed Bianca to be less a child—to have deeper purposes and plans than most people recognized? Nona put this thought away from her. Eugino had certainly treated Bianca with an entirely careless affection. Although aware that marriages were still occasionally arranged by parents in Italy, Nona could not believe it possible that Eugino's mother would wish him to marry the daughter of her servant, no matter how unusual the grl might be.

Then, more sensibly, Nona decided that the matter was not her affair. Whatever her own dreams, she must realize that, so far, they had no foundation in reality.

But the latter part of Sonya's letter,

Nona believed, gave her real cause for anxiety.

She might be foolish and imaginative, of course, but it again struck her as extremely unwise that so much talk of the war in Italy be allowed to go on at Sonya's house. Sonya was a stranger in Italy and had preferred to keep her own somewhat adventurous career as a Russian pacifist, and a sometimes Russian revolutionist, a secret to their new Italian acquaintance.

There was no reason for this, except that Sonya desired not to attract comment or attention, now that Russia had shaken off her old bonds and was finding herself in her own way. But, if for any reason Sonya should come under suspicion and her career be investigated, why the story of her past life would not be simple and might create complications.

Simply because Sonya was a gracious, charming woman, her Italian guests had no right to take so much for granted.

However, it seemed incredible that there could be anyone near Sonya at the present time who was not entirely trustworthy.

But Nona's was a more thoughtful than impetuous nature, and having passed through so many odd experiences since the beginning of her Red Cross nursing in Europe, she saw no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

For a few moments Nona thought of writing Sonya and suggesting that she give up her tea parties. Then she wondered if Sonya would take her with sufficient seriousness and concluded to wait until she next saw her.

Then a sudden added pressure of work coming just at this time, Nona temporarily allowed her intention to pass from her mind.

She had not forgotten, however, and subconsciously the thought was still with her.

Only for the time being she must give her more active attention to something else.

Then, one morning Dr. Latham unexpectedly asked her if she would go with him that same afternoon to the Cascini—the public gardens at the edge of Florence.

The doctor confessed that he had some-

thing special he wished to say and had therefore chosen a place where he hoped they might be alone.

For a moment after his invitation Nona was curious. The good doctor had looked grave. What secret could he possibly have to impart? Nona could not guess, having seen but little of him recently, owing to the pressure of hospital work upon them both.

Indeed, after her first moment of curiosity, Nona had no further time for reflection until the hour arrived for her usual afternoon rest. And, even then, she was in perfectly good spirits and looking forward to her excursion.

As is often the case when the moment of approaching disaster is actually reached, one has forgotten the premonitions which have oftentimes warned us.

But Dr. Latham was like his ordinary self all the way out to the gardens.

He and Nona rode a part of the way on the tram, known in Florence by the so much more imposing name—the circum vallazione. Afterwards they walked along the Lungarno and past the beautiful Cor-

sini palace until they arrived at an especially beautiful group of ilex trees near the edge of the river.

It was Nona who then reminded her companion:

"Look here, Dr. Latham, you had something or other you said you wished to tell me. Please don't forget, or our time will have slipped by and we must both be back at work."

The doctor frowned.

"I had not forgotten. I was trying to decide just what to say. For I may have something very important to tell you and I may have something very foolish, and for the life of me, Miss Nona, I can't decide. That is why I want to put the matter up to you. I may be a stupid old gossip. But if I am, there is no harm done."

The two friends continued to walk on slowly, Nona rather wishing the doctor would come to the point.

"It seems to me people talk a great deal in this city of Florence, but perhaps not more than in other places. I am not much

accustomed to society. Neither am I so very old, you know," Dr. Latham announced, as if Nona had just accused him of being. "But I have devoted most of my time to learning to be—well, just a half-way good doctor. But recently, since you seem to have had other things to do, Miss Nona, rather than amuse me, why I have been gadding about a good deal. I keep meeting old American acquaintances who had disappeared from my life to find they have tucked themselves away here in Florence. And, as I've told you, I've heard a lot of talk. But the talk I have not enjoyed hearing is about that good-looking friend of yours. I never have made up my mind, you know, whether I like her. But I certainly don't want to see her come to grief, for your sake, if for no other reason," and insensibly Dr. Latham's voice altered in tone.

But Nona paid no attention to this.

"You mean Sonya, of course," she returned quickly, her own premonition of trouble returning.

"Yes, I mean Sonya. People in Flor-

ence are saying that she is too popular and that too little is known of her. They also say that news of some of the conversations that have been taking place at the Villa Felice is spreading to other sources than those where it belongs. Of course it is scarcely Madame Sonya's fault if her Italian guests are too outspoken. I have said things myself out there which perhaps had better have been left unsaid. Just the same, if the gossip becomes serious, and if any important information be delivered to an untrustworthy person there might be the devil to pay. Italy has never been able to rid herself altogether of her German inhabitants, I hear, she was so overstocked with them when this war broke out. Not that I should worry if I were you, Miss Nona. Personally, I don't think there is a thing in the world to worry over so far. But I think I'd tell your friend that she had best be a little more careful of the conversation of her guests."

"I'll go out there tomorrow," Nona returned, her voice shaking a little, although determined not to let Dr. Latham know how much his warning had frightened her.

If she had not thought the same thing herself before this afternoon, she would perhaps have taken more calmly the fact that Sonya was exciting gossip. Sonya should have known better. However, she seemed to be one of the persons who cannot pass through life quietly. Try as she might, she seemed ever the center of a drama.

CHAPTER XVI

Sonya's Knight

SONYA was waiting in the drawing-room at the villa for her guest. This was the hour when she and Carlo worked together at the piano.

He seemed to be accomplishing wonderful results. Sonya insisted that she would not long be sufficiently well educated in music to teach him, but this, of course, Carlo insisted was ridiculous. He was not in reality skilled in technic, only his feeling for music was so strong that the music came as if he were only a medium through which it passed into outer harmony.

But this morning he was not on time and Sonya wandered about the room a little impatiently.

Carlo's own apartment was only a short distance down the hall. But she would not send for him, as something of importance must be delaying him.

However, in another five minutes Carlo appeared.

He was able to walk and, except that he was thin and white, no longer behaved as an invalid.

However, this morning when she caught sight of his face, Sonya was startled.

"What is it, Carlo? What has occurred?" she demanded immediately. "You look a great deal worse than you did an hour ago at breakfast. Nothing has happened—no one has been here to disturb you. I must send into Florence for the doctor."

Sonya was more than usually excited. But, then, she had grown fond of her visitor.

Carlo caught hold both of her hands.

"Nothing has happened and nothing is the matter—dear lady—at least nothing that should disturb you. But just now in my room, all alone, I tried very softly—to sing." Carlo only rarely hesitated with his words in speaking now. "At first the sound was very thick, very harsh, then a few notes came. Oh, they were nothing any one else could endure. But to me——"

Suddenly the Italian boy's eyes filled with tears, and Sonya's did also.

"It cannot mean anything of course, dear lady; but some day perhaps just to myself —or to you—I may yet be able to sing a little."

"You may be able to do a great deal more, Carlo. But please let us not talk about it now. Neither you nor I can quite bear it. Sit down for a moment, won't you? I am going to ask Nannina to bring us both some coffee before we begin to work. I need it, Carlo, after your news, even if you do not."

And Sonya went away, giving Carlo time to recover himself. For she understood the boy's temperament—knew how emotional he was—how quick to change from gayety to depression. But this was a part of his artist inheritance.

When she returned he was sitting at the piano, letting his long fingers wander idly over the keys; not trying to sing, of course, but playing, the Neapolitan Boat Song, which was one of the songs he had cared most to sing before his disaster.

Then, after the coffee, for an hour he and Sonya worked at the piano together.

At the end of that time they were both surprised to hear the noise of footsteps outside on the piazza. They had heard no one approach.

Sonya went over to the window.

"It is two strange men, Carlo. Stay here with me, won't you, until we find out what they wish?"

Instinctively Sonya must have felt that the men had come upon some errand not agreeable.

Soon after Nannina opened the front door and brought them to the drawing-room and then promptly disappeared.

However, as they were Italians, their manners were properly polite.

"We desire to see you upon a disagreeable business, Signora," one of them began. He spoke careful English, while his companion apparently knew only a limited number of English words.

"Very well," Sonya returned. She was puzzled but not frightened.

Evidently a difficulty of some kind had

arisen in which she was concerned. Some one whom she knew must be involved.

For Sonya believed that she had been leading too quiet a life to be in touch otherwise with any matter of importance. Therefore, her chief interest at present was to find out the real reason for the men's errand as quickly as possible.

It was not necessary for the newcomers to explain to Sonya that they were Italian officials in the dress of civilians. She had recognized this as soon as they entered the drawing room. Her experiences in Russia had given her a peculiar knowledge which most men and women do not have.

Carlo, for instance, at the beginning of Sonya's conversation with the two Italians, was entirely in the dark. They appeared to him as ordinary men upon some ordinary errand. It was even possible that they might be salesmen who had entered the house under a pretense of mystery in order to introduce themselves more successfully and later on their wares.

However, the first statement and the way in which Sonya responded stirred Carlo to a sense of something unusual.

Then immediately something was aroused in him which he had never felt before in his life—a protective instinct. For Sonya might regard herself as Carlo's mother, but he did not think of her in this light.

"Go on, please; explain just why you have come to speak to me and exactly what your errand means," Sonya went on with an extraordinary self-possession which surprised her small audience. "You see, I understand you have come upon official business. In a time like this I cannot but presume it has some connection with the war. Yet, as I am a stranger in Italy and have been living so quietly out here, I cannot imagine how I can have any connection with any circumstance which would interest you."

If Sonya spoke with perfect self-composure she really felt more uneasiness than she confessed. But not for herself. In truth, she had not the faintest idea that she could be involved in any difficulty, save as an outsider. Nevertheless she was uneasy, endeavoring to guess what possible human being whom she knew in Italy

could have become involved in trouble which had any connection with her.

"We will do as you ask, Signora, and not waste time, since our charge is serious," the Italian answered, continuing to speak courteously. "It has come to our knowledge that information obtained at your home has been given to an individual living at present in Florence, who is under suspicion of being here in the service of the German Government. The fact is the man has been arrested and most conclusive proof found. Without his knowledge he has been quietly watched for some time. Among his letters and papers, written in a childish, unformed hand, was knowledge secured through conversations held at your house. There is no doubt of this, for no effort was made to disguise the fact. However, there is doubt, Signora, that this information came from you, but since this is your home and there is some talk about the circumstances of your past life having been unusual, an investigation will have to be made. In the meantime——"

Sonya had seated herself while the man

was talking. At first her expression was one of entire amazement and then of growing interest.

"What you tell me hardly seems possible to me," she replied slowly, "but since you say you have positive evidence, it would be ridiculous for me to make an attempt to dispute it. But I think I am more puzzled than you can be. I have such a small household—only my housekeeper, an Italian woman, and her young daughter, and Signor Navara, who is here recovering from a wound. The other people who have come to my villa have simply been guests who have stayed a short time and gone away. Also they have been Italians to whom the cause of Italy is everything. Certainly it is but natural that you should prefer to suspect me. I presume you wish me to go into Florence with you. I will go with pleasure. I assure you that next to your own government, I am anxious to have this mystery explained."

At this Sonya rose from her chair, only to have Carlo get up at the same time.

"Wait a minute, please," he said with unexpected dignity and forcefulness.

He then turned to the two Italians.

"I too appreciate and am equally puzzled by what you have just told us. And as I also have been living here at the Villa Felice at the time, when a spy has evidently been among us, you can understand that I want to find out who the individual was. But the thing I am not prepared to agree to is that you prefer to have your first suspicion center upon Signora Valesky. There is no possible reason for this. It expresses a lack of courtesy to a guest in your country and to one of your own Allies. The Signora is a Russian, who has been living in the United States only for a year or more before coming to Italy. She must not be subjected to indignity. I will not permit it. I am an Italian soldier and have come from the United States to fight for the Italian cause. It is I who will go with you into Florence instead of the Signora. When the time comes for the actual trial I am sure she will be glad then to put herself at your disposal and to give you whatever aid she can. In the meantime, if you will allow me a few moments—"

Carlo moved toward the door and for an instant Sonya watched him, overwhelmed by surprise. What had become of his usual boyishness, of his lack of self-control? He now spoke like a man and one with authority, when a short time before he had come to her with tears in his eyes asking for her sympathy, because he believed he had the right to a little hope for his own future.

And evidently Carlo had impressed the two Italian officials as well.

The one who understood English answered him with respect.

"I understand your point of view, Signor, and am sorry not to be able to agree with it. But we have our orders. The Signora is to come into Florence, and no one else can take her place. I can assure you that she will be treated with entire respect and the whole affair kept as quiet as possible. When the time of the actual trial comes, of course it may be difficult then to keep matters as quiet as we could wish. The man who is involved, to whom valuable information has been given from

more than one source, is unfortunately married to a prominent Italian woman and has used her name as a shelter for a long time. If you will make your preparations, Signora——"

Sonya moved over toward Carlo.

"You are very kind, Carlo mio," she whispered quietly under her breath, speaking to him as a boy again. "But please don't make any fuss. I shall probably not have to stay away more than a few days and I am anxious to discover what all this means. Take care of things here for me and try to think who can have been the informant. As for me, I am perfectly hopeless. I have not the faintest idea."

Carlo took hold of Sonya's arm almost roughly.

"You shall not go; I will not permit it, after all you have done for me," he choked boyishly. But Sonya noticed even at this trying moment that he spoke without any of his usual hesitation.

"Don't be absurd, Carlo. You know I hate scenes, and one faces the inevitable."

Then, without waiting for further argu-

ment, Sonya disappeared to her own apartment. Five minutes later she came back, ready to go into Florence.

But this time Bianca was with her, clinging to her skirts and looking more distressed than any one had ever seen Bianca, except at the time of the death of her great friend, the Donna Elizabetta.

That afternoon, when Nona appeared at the Villa Felice feeling annoyed with Sonya over the whole ridiculously unnecessary situation, she, of course, found Sonya gone.

But Carlo did his best to explain the situation. However, he looked so white and ill again that Nona was almost as much concerned for him as she was for Sonya. All his old difficulty in speaking appeared to have returned.

"But you must not worry so, Carlo," Nona argued, using his first name as she had not done before, except in speaking of him with Sonya. "You see, it is pretty annoying and horrid for Sonya, of course. But the whole thing is sure to be explained in a few days and Sonya will take it sensibly. Afterwards people will be extremely apolo-

getic to her. Of course it is disgusting that any of us here at this enchanting villa should have to be mixed up with spying and deceit. It seems perfectly incredible to me. But one appears unable to escape treachery."

Carlo shook his head mournfully.

"Why, would—they not—suspect me? I could—for the time—have—pretended—to be—the traitor. But—now, if I—could—only find—some clue, I should—not be—in—such despair."

"Oh, cheer up, Carlo," Nona replied almost indignantly, "don't be so despondent. Let us talk over the whole situation. Tell me if you have thought or noticed anything suspicious or peculiar about any one here at the villa at any time when I may have been away. Between us we ought to be able to make some worthwhile discovery, or at least to get hold of some slight information. The world nowadays is filled with just such experiences."

CHAPTER XVII

The Culprit

NONA remained all night at the villa. But she was unable to sleep.

As a matter of fact, she was more unhappy over the situation in which Sonya was at present placed than she was willing to confess to Carlo.

It seemed absurd, too, that Sonya, who had come to Italy hoping only to be left alone and to enjoy a perfectly quiet and undisturbed time, should now be involved in what might become an extremely serious business.

But to Nona also it appeared impossible that there could have been any one at the Villa Felice capable of treachery.

There can be only two reasons for betrayal of a nation's secrets in time of war—one is the love of country, which makes one willing to betray any trust, take any per-

sonal risk for the sake of aiding one's own land. The other is, of course, a love of money. There have been spies who have been bought and paid for as long as modern war has existed.

But the guests at Sonya's had all been Italians, ardent and devoted to Italy's service. If they had been too outspoken this was only because of their too great enthusiasm. It was barely possible that afterwards one of them might have said too much of what he had heard at Sonya's without appreciating the seriousness of what he was doing. But Carlo had reported that actual papers had been found with conversations, which had taken place at the Villa Felice, written out in detail.

Nona did not believe that this information was really so important in itself. The important point was that some one had been among them who was undoubtedly in the service of the enemy.

Nona wished there was some one whose advice she might ask in the present difficulty. If only Eugino Zoli were in Florence! He was Sonya's friend and her own.

Carlo was almost as much a stranger in Italy as she was and Dr. Latham was, of course, out of the question.

Then Nona probably fell asleep for a short time.

She was occupying her own bed-room—the one adjoining Sonya's.

She was awakened by hearing a faint noise not far from her own door.

Her door had been accidentally left partly ajar, so, getting up, Nona quietly walked to the door and peeped out.

She saw only Bianca creeping timidly along the hall and then down the stairs at the back of the house. She had on a little wrapper too short for her and looked more childish than ever.

For a moment Nona wondered what in the world she could be doing stealing about the house at such an hour of the night. Then she realized that Bianca must be going to find her mother.

Nannina slept on the lower floor of the villa in a room which had been built upon the house for her use.

Naturally Bianca was worried by the

events of the day. Nona had noticed how white and unhappy she had appeared, but had talked to her very little during the afternoon.

But evidently Bianca had some affection for her mother and was seeking her now for consolation.

Since Nona was convinced of this it was curious that she should have instantly slipped on her dressing gown and prepared to follow Bianca. Yet she did this without making a sound that could betray her presence to the other girl.

As soon as she reached it, Bianca entered her mother's room without knocking; but she did not close the door tightly afterwards.

Outside Nona stood and waited. After all, she had a reason which she considered justified her in trying to hear what Bianca could have to say to her mother at this hour of the night. Bianca's seeking Nannina at this time might not be due entirely to the fact that she wished to be comforted.

Yet the first thing Nona overheard was Bianca crying softly.

She did this—as she did most things—in a gentle, refined fashion, but revealing deeper emotion than Nona had believed her capable of feeling.

Yet, instead of trying to console her daughter for whatever was troubling her, Nannina said something to her in response which sounded angry and harsh.

"But I didn't know that the Signora would have to suffer—you should have told me," Bianca answered with more courage than she usually showed to her mother. "She has been most kind to me and I am fond of her."

Bianca spoke quietly, but did not whisper, having no idea, of course, that any one could be listening.

Nannina's tones were lower, but perhaps more from habit than from any other reason, as she too believed that she and Bianca were at present alone in the lower part of the house. However, whenever she had talked to her daughter in the past she had always spoken in low tones, seldom wishing any one to know what she was saying.

"No; you did not know the Signora would suffer; but, then, neither did I," Nannina returned, speaking a little louder so that Nona could half hear and half guess her words. "But you knew we needed money and that you must have it. Pretty soon your Signora will be going away. Do you think other people will treat you as she has? Your Eugino and Paulo may be killed, or they may forget you. I can't make any more money—Italian people are too poor even to pay what your Signora does. Then what is to become of you?"

"I could work," Bianca returned slowly.

Nannina laughed, but her laugh did not express pleasure.

"You work, Bianca? You do not belong to the kind of people who know how to work. Your father didn't know how before you."

"My father?" Bianca questioned.

And for the first time Nona felt ashamed of her own eavesdropping.

If Bianca and her mother were to talk of their intimate personal affairs, certainly she was doing wrong to listen. And yet

she had already heard enough to make, what had not been more than a vague idea at the beginning now develop into a real suspicion.

"You have scarcely ever mentioned my father to me before. I think you ought to tell me who he was and why you have chosen to bring me up so differently from other girls in my position."

Bianca spoke timidly, as if she were fearful both of her mother and of what her mother might reply.

There was no answer for a moment.

"Oh, well; I suppose you might as well be told," Nannina answered sullenly, "else you'll be imagining more about yourself than is true. Your father was a kind of cousin of the Donna Elizabetta—not a very close cousin—but she had been fonder of him as a girl than her family liked. You see, he was poor and was regarded as of no account in the United States. Well, after the Donna Elizabetta had been married a little while, he sailed over to Italy and one day came to see her. I had just come here to work. Oh, I wasn't so bad looking

then, Bianca, so you need not stare, although I wasn't a bit like your pink and white prettiness. I was tall and dark and strong. It is your father you look like. He just came up to my shoulder. But he had lovely fair hair and skin and charming manners like the Signor Eugino whom you like so much. And he was nice to me—he was nice to everybody—also like the young Signor. The Donna Elizabetta did not know what was going on behind her back of course, but after a little while we were married. We did not tell anybody and I went on working here. Your father did not have any money, and he continued staying at the Villa Felice because he had no other place to go. The Donna Elizabetta's husband was not too pleased. So you see we were afraid to tell, for fear your father would have no home, and he was accustomed to being comfortable and cared for by some one."

Nannina was not speaking with any harshness or condemnation, but with a kind of pride and tenderness.

Outside her door, Nona Davis felt her

cheeks flaming. There was no doubt she had not the right to hear Nannina's confession; yet she made no move toward going away.

"Well, after a while we had to tell and then your father was angry and sorry he had ever married me. His family was furious. They had done a little for him now and then—given him the money to come abroad—but they wrote him then that he would have to go to work and support his peasant wife. He had never supported himself.

"The Donna Elizabetta was angry, too, at first—more so than any one. But she was very kind and she also cared a great deal for your father, Bianca."

One could scarcely have guessed it was the Italian peasant woman who was speaking. Her voice was deep and soft, and had the musical quality of the Italian voice, which before had been lacking in Nannina's.

"So there was nothing for your father to do but try to find work. He did try for a little while and the Donna Elizabetta

took care of me. Then you were born. He had no money to come back to us at that time, as he had gone away to another city, where the Donna Elizabetta's husband had gotten him work. But it was too hard for him and after a while the people he was living with sent for me. He was ill and I brought him back home. The Donna Elizabetta and I took care of him in a little house she had rented for us. But he had taken cold and then gone on working too long afterwards; so, after a little time, he died. You see, everybody can't work, Bianca mia, although the world believes they can. But when he died your father made me promise that you were to be brought up as his daughter should be. Once or twice he said he was sorry he had given you a peasant mother, but that he cared for me because I was always good to him. So I have tried to be good to you, Bianca, although I have not tried to make you love me. I have not wished you to think about me too much, because I knew you, too, would be ashamed.

"I am sorry about the Signora, because

she has been good to you and you care for her. It is natural, Bianca, that you should feel close to some one. It is not your fault that you do not love me. You cannot help it. But I didn't know that what I have been doing would ever be found out. There was no other way I could get enough money for you. I have thought lately, maybe if there was money the Signora might take you to the United States with her when she goes and put you into a school there. But if I had dreamed we would be found out, do you think I would have let you help me? I used to try to stay with the Signora's guests as long as I could to find out what was being said. But I could not always manage, so I began letting you repeat to me what you heard and then when I was too stupid to remember I let you write it down. Now, Bianca, mia, can't you see, if we are found out—if they discover I have been selling Italy's secrets —it is you who must suffer also. Oh, I ought to have known better. I ought to have kept you out of this."

"Yes, Nannina," Bianca answered, her

voice shaking. "I am stupid, too, or I might have guessed I would be endangered. But I have always been stupid."

Forgetting for an instant that she was in hiding, Nona actually gasped. But not at Nannina's treachery. As soon as Nannina and Bianca began their conversation she had anticipated something of what Nannina had just confessed.

Wicked and unforgivable it was that Nannina had betrayed her country for money in order to bestow it upon her daughter! But at the instant it seemed almost worse to Nona Davis, that Bianca could accept her mother's complete sacrifice of herself in the spirit in which evidently she did accept it. Even now her thought was not for her mother but wholly for herself.

Then Nona, recalling the story which Nannina had just told, remembering the utter and supreme selfishness of the man who had been Nannina's husband and was Bianca's father, wondered if this did not explain Bianca's nature?

But there was no more reason why she

should linger. Already Nannina had told more than she had dreamed of hearing.

What had taken place was self-evident. Between them Nannina and Bianca had sold information, which they overheard at Sonya's to a secret agent of the German Government.

What Nona did not know at this moment was what she must do with the information she had overheard.

However, she would go to Sonya the next day and confide in her. Then between them they must decide what was best

CHAPTER XVIII

Nannina Solves the Problem

ON the following day Nona was permitted to see Sonya.

Sonya was being made as comfortable as possible, only there was to be no possibility of her getting away from Florence until after the trial of the man whom she was suspected of having supplied with dangerous information.

At Nona's revelation Sonya was more surprised than Nona had been upon overhearing it. But then Sonya had always regarded Nannina and Bianca as far more simple and ordinary persons than Nona had ever thought them. Naturally she had considered their relation to each other unusual and not pleasant; but, as a matter of fact, Sonya had really troubled herself very little concerning it.

Yet now the situation which Nona brought before her was amazingly difficult to solve.

There was no question that Nannina had been a traitor to Italy. If her information to the enemy was not important, this was because Sonya's guests had never betrayed any news of great value. But Nannina had not known this. She had been a traitor in intention.

However, even while realizing the seriousness of this, neither Sonya nor Nona wished to face the penalty Nannina must pay. Even at best she would suffer life imprisonment. And she was only an ignorant, peasant woman with an entirely foolish, but utterly unselfish devotion to her child.

Besides, there was Bianca! How far would she be held responsible?

After all, she was a delicate, fragile young girl, brought up with altogether wrong ideas and principles. Certainly she had not realized what she was taking part in. Fear would have withheld Bianca had she understood, even if no better motive had restrained her. And Sonya had an affection for Bianca and faith in her. Better than Nona she understood how

human beings may be made up of good and evil. Bianca's selfishness toward her mother was appalling. But some day some one else might wake in her a finer quality; when, through love, she would comprehend her own selfishness.

Nona and Sonya were sitting close beside each other while they had their talk. Finally Nona reached over and took her friend's hand.

"Sonya, I am discussing this matter with you, but you must understand I have no idea of your being made a victim in order to protect the persons who are really guilty. Whatever you decide, I have already decided to tell what I overheard to the proper authorities and then leave it to them to prove whether I am mistaken."

Sonya frowned slightly over the seriousness of the situation and then smiled.

"Nona, you are very sweet to think I am such an altruist. But I have no idea of making a martyr of myself in order to shield Nannina. For one thing, she deserves to be punished. She must be made to realize the crime she has committed.

Don't think I am a sentimentalist who does not believe in a measure of retribution. What worries me is the extent to which Nannina must pay, and Bianca as well. All of Nannina's life probably, and the best of Bianca's. These are war times which do not inspire people to be lenient and, least of all, to the sin of treachery. Will you give me just a night more, Nona dear, to think this situation over? Come to see me again tomorrow and promise me to say nothing until then. I don't think there can be any possible harm in our delay, as Nannina has no idea she is suspected. You have not said anything to Carlo."

Nona shook her head.

"If I had, do you suppose he would have waited an instant before coming into Florence to see that you were exonerated? No; he is moping about the villa as if there were nothing left in life for him."

However, although Nona would not give her consent at first to Sonya's suggestion of delay, she did finally agree.

Then her work at the hospital next day kept her so busy that it was impossible for her to see Sonya.

But the following morning, to her amazement, Sonya herself drove up to the hospital and asked for her.

"You must come to the villa with me for a few hours, Nona dear. Arrange things in some fashion—say your presence is imperative. I have something of the greatest importance to tell you."

Afterwards, on the way home, Sonya explained what had occurred.

"I waited for you all of yesterday, Nona, yet dreading in a way to see you. For I had made up my mind, of course, that there was nothing for us to do but to tell the truth to the Italian authorities. For Nannina might go on with her treachery and really become a menace to the country in which we are trusted guests as well as Allies. Well, you did not come, but about dusk, some one else did. It was the man who had been out to the villa and who had actually arrested me, although I know the Italians would use some more courteous term, as things have turned out.

"As soon as he came into my room I saw his manner had changed. He had been

polite before, now he was apologetic. Moreover, he held a letter in his hands, which had been opened. He gave it to me, however, and I saw that my address was upon it in an ignorant handwriting. The letter, as you have guessed, was from Nannina. In it she confessed to me what she had been doing and told me she had gone away forever."

Until now Nona had not interrupted. She had been sitting, leaning a little forward in the old carriage in which she and Sonya were riding, intently listening.

"But, Sonya, I don't understand," she now argued. "I can't see any sense in Nannina writing you. She did not know any one suspected her and she had nothing to gain by her confession."

"You are mistaken, Nona. Nannina is not so stupid as you think. You know there is only one person in the world for whom she cares—and that is Bianca, not herself. Remember, she did know that I had been arrested and that the authorities understood the information had been given by some one living in the Villa Felice.

When a closer investigation came, Nannina realized that she would in all probability be found out. But in her letter to me she says that she confessed in order to save me—and here is the important point. She asks me if I will look after Bianca and take her to the United States when I go. She insists that she will never be heard of again. And she not only sent me her confession, but wrote to the Italian authorities as well. They opened my letter to see if she told me the same story. But she had said a great deal more to them, explaining what she had done in greater detail, so there could be no doubt of her guilt, and of course not mentioning Bianca.

"Don't you see, Nona, that in this way Nannina saves Bianca? If a trial had taken place Bianca must have been drawn into it. Now Nannina assumes the entire responsibility. Then, if, by chance, I have taken Bianca to the United States with me before Nannina is discovered, Bianca will escape even the disgrace."

"Poor old thing!" Nona exclaimed unexpectedly. Then she was silent a moment.

"But are you going to take Bianca back home with you, Sonya? Are you willing to accept such a charge, knowing how selfish Bianca is? You know she even tells little lies to save herself, or to secure what she happens to want. I don't see how you dare."

Sonya turned her face away.

"I am not very enthusiastic, Nona, but I don't see just what else there is to do with the child. There is a chance, of course, that Nannina may be arrested at any moment; she had only eighteen hours in which to disappear—perhaps not so long. In that case we cannot tell what may happen. But if she is not discovered —oh, well, I must talk over the child's future with her foster brothers. From your story they are distant cousins as well and ought to be a little interested. Really I am intensely sorry for her. You were quite right in predicting, Nona, that I would not be able to hide myself from responsibilities. I somehow feel as if I were 'The Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe,' only all my children are grown up."

For the first time Nona smiled since the beginning of Sonya's story.

"Oh, I don't think Carlo and I are willing to accept you in that position. But do you know, Sonya, I have been thinking lately that when the summer is over I want to go back to my own country. Since we have declared war I feel I ought to be there to help, or at least have them send me back to France if I am needed there. Our own men are fighting in the trenches in France now. And, yet, somehow if Italy still needs me I don't see how I can go."

They were in sight of the Villa Felice at this moment—the home which belonged to Eugino and Paulo Zoli.

So, without Nona's realizing it, Sonya looked closely at the younger girl. She believed she understood why there were moments when Nona longed to go home, for other reasons than to offer her services to her own country, and then at other times felt that nothing could make her break the tie that was now binding her to Italy.

Nona was restless for something which at one moment she longed for and the next feared to possess.

CHAPTER XIX

The Sign of the Cross

NANNINA was not discovered. How or where she had disappeared no one knew. She had simply gone away from the villa, taking only a handful of clothes and saying nothing to any one. She had not so much as said good-bye to Bianca. Though mistaken and wrong as she was, yet the peasant woman had her own kind of heroism.

As for Bianca, she had a talk about her mother with Sonya, but Sonya never betrayed what the young girl confided to her.

However, Bianca went about looking so pallid and frightened and so childish that even Nona pitied her. No one would ever appreciate just what she suffered concerning her mother. It was dreadful to think that at any moment her mother might be discovered and arrested. Yet, if she were not discovered, what had become of her?

Then Bianca had no idea what her own future was to be, for Sonya had not decided what to do. She was waiting to see Bianca's foster brothers—Eugino and Paulo Zoli—when they returned again to Florence. But when this would be it was impossible to guess.

Sonya and Bianca both had written them of what had occurred and had received short letters in return. However, no mention was made of Bianca's ever having had any previous knowledge of what Nannina was doing. Nevertheless, they both appeared too angry and too horrified over the behavior of their old servant to express any particular sympathy or concern for their foster sister.

Nevertheless, on the outside things went on at the Villa Felice much as they had been doing. A new housekeeper was obtained and Bianca continued to live as if she were a member of the family. But she was evidently not happy.

Hour after hour, sitting with her embroidery or whatever plain sewing Sonya found for her to do, she used often to long

to see her foster brothers. For now that her mother was gone and she knew her father to be dead, they were the only friends left of her former life. Who knows but perhaps Bianca was also disappointed at the story her mother had told of herself? Perhaps in those hours when she had been alone in her pretty room, dressed in dainty clothes and seeing her own fair appearance, Bianca had dreamed of a more romantic history.

But, as the weeks went on and the fighting on the Italian front grew daily fiercer and more victorious for the Italian cause, Sonya became almost as anxious for an interview with one of Bianca's foster brothers as the young girl. For, although Nona had never referred again to returning to the United States, Sonya was becoming anxious to sail.

She had not cared to go on entertaining her Italian acquaintances after her own unpleasant experience. And, although she had made no complaint, she had resented the suspicion entertained of her.

Then Sonya also felt it best that Carlo

Navara return to his own people. There were several reasons for this. For one thing, he was not going to be able to rejoin the Italian forces for some time, as the shock of his accident and its consequences had too severely shattered his nervous system. However, Sonya did not feel that he should go on staying at the villa with her indefinitely. For, in some way, their relation had changed. Carlo no longer seemed willing to have her treat him as an ill and rather spoiled boy. His attitude was far more that of a grown man and Sonya realized, although she did her best to disbelieve it, that Carlo was growing too fond of her.

Perhaps this was not so unnatural as Sonya considered it. In spite of the fact that she was so much older, Sonya was a rarely beautiful woman, with a breeding and distinction which were new to Carlo. Then, for many months, she had been exquisitely his friend—had given him hope and courage and care.

Carlo used even to sing a little these days to Sonya, when the two of them were

alone. But his voice was no longer the perfect golden voice it had once been. So Sonya was also anxious that he return to the United States for more scientific treatment. Indeed, her interest was much more for Carlo than for herself, as she wished him not to suffer the disaster of thinking he cared for a woman more than ten years his age. Having had so much experience, she knew it was sometimes harder for a boy to recover from an emotion of this kind than most people realize.

Then, one morning at the end of the summer Sonya came down-stairs to her breakfast room and found she was the first to arrive at the table, neither Carlo nor Bianca having appeared.

The Italian newspaper was always laid at Sonya's plate, as she liked to glance at the headlines before eating. She had learned to read Italian fairly fluently.

This morning the paper recorded another Italian victory. The Italians had beaten back fierce mass drives in the neighborhood of Udine and had taken several thousand Austrian prisoners.

Sonya was reading this news, when it seemed to her that her eyes were impelled to turn from the account which was deeply interesting, to a smaller paragraph in the next column.

The first few lines read: "Felled two air foes in one-minute fight. Then Captain Eugino Zoli, one of the most famous of Italian aviators, falls to his death. Has destroyed twenty-one German and Austrian machines."

For an instant it seemed to Sonya that she must have been mistaken in what she had read. Then a second time looking at the account she re-read more slowly:

"What had happened to Captain Eugino Zoli was merely what was happening to brilliant and daring airmen the world over. Only because of his unusual record was the paper giving him special mention.

"The night before enemy aircraft having made a raid on Udine, dropping bombs over the village, among other airmen Captain Zoli had gone up in his airship to put them to flight and had succeeded in destroying two machines in an incredibly short

time. Then his own machine was struck by an anti-aircraft gun and started its headlong crash to the earth.

"However, Captain Zoli was able so to direct it that he fell within the Italian lines. As a special distinction his body would be taken to his home near Florence. He was to be buried with military honors."

After this Sonya fully realized what new difficulties she had to face.

There was of course Bianca, who cared more for Eugino Zoli than for any one in the world. She would be entering the room in a moment and must be told the news.

Yet it was not of Bianca that Sonya was thinking most deeply at this time. Would Nona realize now how much she cared for Eugino Zoli? For Sonya had seen what Nona had fought against accepting, the fact of how greatly the young Italian officer interested and fascinated her. In Nona's mind there was also the thought that when Eugino returned again from the front, he would say to her the things which before he had only implied.

Well, Sonya understood that Eugino Zoli was the type of man for whom girls and women always care, and who cares for them only slightly in return.

He was always gay and charming and good tempered, making agreeable, half loverlike speeches because circumstances inspired him. But all the while his own deeper feeling was for something else. Eugino Zoli's great emotion was the great cause of Italy, and Sonya appreciated that he had given his life gladly in his country's service. He had died at his supreme moment.

It is for women only perhaps that the moment of love is the supreme moment of life.

Fortunately for Sonya, however, Bianca merely behaved like a little girl at the news of her foster brother's death. She simply went to bed and was ill for two days. But then she had had so much to trouble her!

Fortunately for Bianca in those days, Sonya told her that she would take her back to the United States when she left Italy.

Naturally Nona Davis received the news differently. At first she was shocked and grieved. Then, after a little, it was almost as if Nona had a strange sensation of personal relief. For perhaps through Eugino's death she may have been saved a more real sorrow. Well, she had promised Sonya in a light-hearted fashion not to learn to care for an Italian and now fate had arranged that she should keep her word.

However, no one who attended Captain Zoli's funeral could ever forget it.

Paulo was given leave to bring him home.

The little Italian cemetery, filled with cypress trees and roses and beautiful carved stones gray with age, was not far from the Villa Felice.

But Eugino's funeral was unlike others, since it was a funeral in the air.

The day was brilliant and the sky blue with the romance that has colored all Italian history.

Suddenly as the service was closing there was a queer, whirring noise which seemed to come from the clouds.

Looking up in the sky, the spectators saw moving toward them, like a flock of migrating birds, more than a dozen airplanes.

They had flown out from one of the aviation schools near Florence to do homage to one of Italy's greatest airmen.

Above the grave they hovered for a moment and then breaking into two divisions, the one intercepting the other diagonally, they formed a giant cross. And at the same moment Italian roses, red and white, showering down from them, covered Eugino's grave.

Then one of the aviators, who had been a friend and comrade in the air with Eugino, volplaned near the earth and dropped a wreath of roses tied with Italy's colors, which fluttered slowly to the ground.

Late that night—it must have been nearly twelve o'clock, Nona—who was spending the night at the Villa Felice, slipped from her own room into Sonya's.

Sonya was in bed but not asleep and had a little night taper burning.

Nona sat down on the bed beside her.

She was glad of the semi-darkness and glad too of the lateness of the hour. You see, she was very tired from the strain of the afternoon, but there was something she felt it might be easier to say tonight than afterwards.

Nona reached out and found her friend's hand.

"There is something, Sonya, I think you have understood, although we have never talked of it. It is all finished now and I am glad there is nothing I wish to forget. But I feel I want to go home to my own country, Sonya, if you are willing. For some time I have thought perhaps it was really my duty to be there, rather than here in Italy at this time. But you have known why I could not make up my mind to leave Italy."

"Yes, Nona, I have known," Sonya answered quietly.

Then, there in the darkness of the night in Italy, she recited the last verse of the Battle Hymn of the American Republic—the challenge to all men and women to the service of the right.

"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on."

W